

LONDON Influence from POLITICO

By MATT HONEYCOMBE-FOSTER

Welcome to London Influence, still clearing up the mess left by the last Whig government. Comments, tips and complaints to [@matt_hfoster](#) or mhfoster@politico.co.uk | [View in your browser](#)

SNEAK PEEK

- Westminster's PR pros put party plans on ice as train strikes bite.
- Retail giant John Lewis leads the charge for a parental leave shake-up.
- Reasons to be cheerful with More in Common boss — and ex-Spad — Luke Tryl.

LOBBYING WESTMINSTER

THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT OF WARM WINE: Fresh woe for SW1's influence crowd this week as some of the best-laid schmoozing and boozing plans are scuppered by strikes.

The real Partygate: PR giant FleishmanHillard is one of the biggest casualties of the massive pay and conditions bust-up on the railways. The outfit's summer bash — due tonight — had to be postponed to September, teeing up some frantic rearranging and contacting of invitees.

Pressing on: Others are gamely pressing ahead with reduced-turnout jamborees, but spare a thought for the public affairs pro who messaged us with a simple "RIP" after a client pulled the plug on a painstakingly-planned roundtable last-minute. "Imagine herding cats to ensure the right people get invited and then it all gets taken away," they said.

It gets worse: "I can't go to ABC's 40th-anniversary concert," lamented one civil service digital pro whose world is now [full of strange arrangements](#). "Devastated."

More of a standing in the corner guy: It was plain sailing for POLITICO's own summer boat party, although your Influence author had to run for an earlier last train just as he was about to tell his first interesting anecdote of the evening. Honest.

PARENT POWER: As Boris Johnson's government searches down the back of the sofa tasks its finest minds to find ways to help with the soaring cost of living, a major U.K. employer wants Westminster to get serious about helping new parents.

Lewis lobbying: The John Lewis Partnership — which boasts 78,000 workers across the U.K. — is lobbying ministers and officials to learn lessons from its own big overhaul of parental leave, and to build on a Coalition-era change that's had patchy take-up.

Reminder: The Conservative-Liberal Democrat government introduced shared parental leave back in 2015, allowing eligible parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay after they have a baby.

But but but: Use of the policy has been pretty low by all accounts. Whitehall estimates that between 2 and 8 percent of eligible couples have actually made use of the system, while campaign group Maternity Action [dug into the figures a bit](#) more and found the take-up rate among eligible dads was just 3.6 percent in 2019-20.

Turnaround tales: Ministers launched a campaign to try and get more people [using their new entitlement](#) under Theresa May's administration, while Boris Johnson's government [cast about for ideas](#) way back in 2019 but has not yet responded to its own consultation.

The White stuff: Charlie White, corporate affairs manager at the John Lewis Partnership, wants Westminster to crack on, and says there's a chance for Johnson's team to show it's on the side of "a huge proportion of the electorate."

Not just that but: White argues that improving parental leave is even more important in the face of an "incredibly tight labor market" that's seeing swathes of jobs left unfilled. Improved parental leave and encouraging "more equal sharing of parental responsibilities" will, she says, help "bring people back into the workplace that might have left."

The cost of living angle: "Being able to afford to take that time off with your baby is really important," White says, pointing out that "affordability is a big blocker" to many people who are mulling using the current system, which requires mums and dads to essentially nab leave off each other and work out which salary to cut into in order to use it. That's not to mention the developmental boost that research suggests more time with parents in those early days can offer kids.

I think you've better leave right now: John Lewis's own changes were unveiled last year, and grant all staff who've been with the partnership for a year — regardless of gender or how they've become parents — 26 weeks of paid leave. That's made up of 14 weeks at full pay and 12 at 50 percent pay.

Democracy in action: White says those changes followed lots of "number crunching" and came after workers at the employee-owned business made their views pretty clear through its array of staff networks. "If you're a politico, you'll probably really enjoy it," she says of the retailer's democratic structure, which also has an elected council to hold bosses' feet to the fire. "One of the things that had been coming through loud and clear was that our paternity leave especially was just not good enough," she recalls.

No one-size-fits-all: Of course, what might work for a massive outfit like John Lewis won't necessarily work for a small employer, particularly at a time when businesses are fretting big-time over costs. White stresses that she isn't pitching a one-for-one lift of the company's own changes, and is "not prescriptive about the policy solutions because we recognize not everyone is the John Lewis Partnership."

But but but: The group hopes that by talking about its own experience it can shape the SW1 debate and persuade policymakers and employers to think big.

Results so far: Early data shows that new dads and co-parents are taking an average of 17 weeks paid leave under the John Lewis plan — up sharply from 12 days under the old regime. There's been a 4 percentage point increase in the retention rate for co-parents who've made use of the leave too. And because John Lewis employs everyone from “cow herders through to machinists,” White is hopeful it can show that better baby leave isn't just for those in “a blue-chip company or a management consultancy.”

Picking targets: John Lewis — chaired by former senior civil servant Sharon White and repped by Westminster agency Interel — tries to avoid “lobbying on everything,” says White (no relation), and it aims to be “very thoughtful about where we do and don't intervene.” It's previously spoken out on workplace mental health, while the chair recently urged ministers to put [together a COVID-style](#) emergency package of help for families. In the months to come, it hopes to dig deeper into the hard economic arguments for improving baby leave — so watch this space.

TALKING POINT

“Perhaps Labour's ongoing silence on the issue of gambling reform is the price paid by a cash-strapped party not wanting to upset too many billionaires who might be able to bail them out come election time.”

— Former Jeremy Corbyn aide and reform [campaigner Matt Zarb-Cousin ain't impressed with his party's gambling stance](#) — nor some big-name moves from its front bench to the gaming lobby.

QUICK HITS

GORDON BENNETT: Bit of a [coup for Labour in Communications](#), the network of Westminster PR and comms pros aiming to get the party back into office. It's bagged none other than Gordon Brown for an in-depth Q&A on September 12.

In booze news, the outfit's also doing its latest in-person social [with iNHouse comms next Thursday](#) for those who didn't get a chance to drink a lot and shout loudly about politics this week.

RUSSIAN TO JUDGMENT: Six in 10 [U.K. PR pros say they](#) will boycott companies with Russian links “for the foreseeable future,” according to new research from industry body the PRCA.

OPENING DOORS: Top story from the Sunday Times' intrepid Harry Yorke, who reported this weekend that Conservative peer Charles Chetwynd-Talbot — the Earl of Shrewsbury — [offered to “open doors” in government](#) for a company seeking regulatory approval of its coronavirus sanitizer products. The peer was paid a monthly retainer of £3,000 plus VAT and worked for the firm for over 19 months, [the paper reported](#).

GOING GLOBAL: Agency Global Counsel, co-founded by New Labour supremo Peter Mandelson, has a bunch of new hires to shout about. It's bringing in senior Aussie diplomat Tiffany McDonald as a senior adviser; ex-White House adviser Robert Etter as a director; former U.K. government climate adviser Lorna Ritchie as climate and sustainability practice director; and Raphael Malek joins as head of research and insight from focus groups specialist BritainThinks. [Plenty more new names here](#).

CONTRACTS WATCH: A cool [£2M up for grabs](#) if you can tell Michael Gove's department whether its devolution policies are working ... Think tank the **National Centre for Social Research** is helping HMRC map out [the hidden economy](#) ... Under-fire driving test quango the **Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency** tapped up **PA Consulting** to [help it build](#) "comprehensive economic and strategic cases to support the need" for changes to its fees.

INFLUENCE INTERVIEW — LUKE TRYL

KUMBAYA-FREE ZONE: Don't expect Luke Tryl to bust out the acoustic guitar any time soon.

The More in Common chief wants the U.K.'s policy elites to know that the country is actually a lot less divided than the received wisdom would have them believe. But, Tryl tells Influence, that doesn't mean pushing some "kumbaya, wouldn't it be nice if we all just get along" message.

Latest work: More in Common grabbed plenty of media coverage last week with its in-depth polling and focus [group research on Brits' approach to gender identity](#). It found Westminster and (surprise surprise) social media out of step with the public on trans rights.

"It's a really fraught debate," says Tryl. "But you look at how the public approach it, and despite having strong views on some issues, and differing views on others, the starting point is compassion. And it's just so different to the debate that we end up having in Westminster."

Nuance alert: It's a typical piece of work from More in Common, which was set up in the wake of the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox by a far-right extremist and took its name from her maiden speech in the House of Commons.

Big aims: The group — which also has a foothold in the United States, France and Germany — aims to "tackle polarization and strengthen social cohesion," says Tryl. He reckons the best way it can do that is by closing the "real gap in understanding between people in positions of power and lots of the views of ordinary people."

People in power? Tryl says that includes not just politicians but media types, business leaders and charity bosses too, all of whom can fall victim to thinking the public "are terrible populists" when actually they contain multitudes.

CV: Tryl himself was nabbed from Public First last year to head up More in Common's U.K. arm. He held a string of big Whitehall roles before that, including as special adviser to Nicky Morgan as education secretary during the David Cameron years, and then running strategy and engagement at schools inspector Ofsted.

Get focused: Despite some improvements in recent years, Tryl thinks Whitehall has a way to go in taking focus groups seriously, and plugging detailed public opinion into the policymaking process, rather than just using it for political strategy.

More in Common extends an open invite to any MP or civil servant to sit in on one of its sessions, "because actually, you just don't do it when you're in the process of formulating policy."

For example: On the controversial Rwanda deportation policy, Tryl says voters "certainly support the idea of tackling Channel crossings," but aren't "sold" on the government's proposed fix.

Leveling-up, that long-promised plan to rejuvenate forgotten parts of the U.K. and tackle regional inequality, is well understood by the public, but focus groups pick up on some hyper-local expectations that get missed in SW1. “It’s not even the park in the city center that people want to see improved,” he says. “It’s the one down the road. They want to be able to take their kids to the park without the swings being tied up around the bar on top. And you just don’t get that in government.”

Not just a data dump: Rather than just chucking reams of data at policymakers, Tryl says More in Common is also “trying to do a bit more of the innovative stuff,” including releasing clips of focus group participants so politicians can see the whites of their eyes. There’s a campaigning edge of late, too, with the outfit teaming up with immigration and identity think tank British Future to try and tap into some of the “amazing” public support for housing Ukrainian refugees and helping Afghans too.

Afghan call: Tryl, who is a quarter Ukrainian, says many Afghan families — currently stuck in taxpayer-funded hotels with no real idea about their future — are in the U.K. “because they worked and supported our country in Afghanistan at almost the greatest personal cost.”

It’s not, he says, about copying the Ukraine policy of opening up spare rooms — returning feels a more distant prospect for many Afghans, he notes — but “people will want to help in other ways,” including by helping them to learn English and find work. “You’ve got this generosity of spirit,” he says. “Let’s make sure we use it.”

Energizer: Westminster can be a pretty cynical place, but Tryl reckons there’s room for the bubble to be optimistic too. He comes out of “every focus group feeling energized” by the way the public approaches issues seen as black-and-white in SW1.

“I don’t want to be Kumbaya-ish or Pollyanna-ish about the whole thing,” he adds. Tryl says there “real challenges and there is real anger about things like Partygate,” and a sense in some parts of the country that government “doesn’t work for them, that democracy doesn’t work for them ... But I think there’s a starting point.”

WISDOM IN 280



The image shows a screenshot of a tweet from Robert Colville (@rcolville). The tweet text reads: "Can report that the @CPSThinkTank website is down as well as @TfL. Hackers presumably desperate to stop everyone reading our new report on why an Online Sales Tax is an awful idea." The tweet is timestamped "9:02 AM · Jun 21, 2022 · Twitter Web App".

ON THE MOVE

The **Professional Footballers’ Association** has a new director of external affairs: **Benjamin Wright**, who joins from a senior role at agency Portland and previously ran comms for pro cycling team Team Sky.

Mark Davies — a former Labour [special adviser](#) — is joining the **Refugee Council** as head of communications and campaigns.

Which? public affairs boss **Jane Wallace** is off to head up public affairs for **Trustpilot**, covering the U.K., EU and U.S.

Samin Nanji is joining the **Kraft Heinz Company** as comms manager for Northern Europe after a spell in senior corporate affairs roles at Milk & Honey PR.

Sophie Miremadi, former director of the Commission for Smart Government, joined software firm **AVEVA** as VP for government affairs.

Global spirits maker **Beam Suntory** named **Zsoka McDonald** as chief communications officer and **Brett Hale** as chief public affairs officer. Hale takes on an expanded role at the outfit he joined in 2016, while McDonald joins from drinks giant Diageo.

Kieran O'Connell, ex-head of GB public affairs at Coca-Cola, joined **Amazon** as a public policy manager, focused on the web giant's North of England operations.

Becca Wright joined takeaway giant **Just Eat** as public affairs lead after more than five years with chocolate-maker Ferrero.

Simon Markall got going as senior corporate affairs manager at **Scottish Power** after a five-year stint at industry body Energy UK. Meanwhile, **Jordan Jacobs** is joining **Energy UK** later this month as public affairs officer.

Joseph Silke joined **South Western Railway** as external communications manager (quiet week for it) after a spell as comms manager for think tank Bright Blue.

Former Labour MEP **Rory Palmer** is food bank charity the **Trussell Trust**'s new network lead for the East Midlands after a spell in policy for the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

City of London Corporation external affairs director **Giles French** is off to become the new chief executive of the **Association of Foreign Banks (AFB)** from September.

Matthew Dunn is moving on up to senior consultant at **Lexington**.

Try turning it on and off again: The Digital Tories campaign group, which aims to push digital up the political agenda, picked a new-look team, headed up co-directors **Alice Hopkin** and **Pierre Andrews**. [Grab the full details here.](#)

Best foot forward: A massive get well soon to top wonk Catherine Foot, who's feeling reflective [after what sounds like a nasty fall.](#)

Jobs, jobs, jobs: The **Department of Health** is [on the lookout for](#) a deputy head of media relations ... Two roles going at the **Centre for Social Justice**, as head of work and opportunity, and [senior lead on its "State of the Nation" project](#) ... **Google**'s searching [for a campaign manager](#) in its London government affairs team ... Flurry of jobs going at [SW1 consultancy](#) **College Green Group** ... **Big Brother Watch** is [after a campaigns manager](#) and a digital comms officer.

EVENTS HORIZON: Labour deputy **Angela Rayner** speaks as [the IPPR launches](#) new research on how representative the House of Commons really is, 5 p.m., July 4.

Thanks: To **Paul Dallison** for wading through word treacle and to our ace Brussels equivalent **Sarah Wheaton** for the ideas we already stole.