

HOUSING NEEDS CABINET POST AND CONTINUITY

Only a few weeks ago we hosted our two pre-election debates at Mishcon de Reya with Capital & Regional on the future of our town centres and high streets. The first was with shadow minister for communities and local government Roberta Blackman-Woods, the second with housing and planning minister Brandon Lewis.

Looking at the polls at the time, we had no premonition of how this “bonkers” election would finally pan out. We listened carefully to Blackman-Woods outline Labour’s plans to empower local authorities and wondered if we were in for further planning change.

One thing that our audience was clear on was that, in planning terms, we needed certainty rather than further change. Both politicians agreed on the importance of empowering our local authorities to regenerate our town centres and high streets.

As we hastily cancelled our planned evening debate with Lewis, who was called to a last-minute three-line whip in the house, and managed to reschedule a smaller breakfast event for the next day, I reflected sadly that this could be the last of a number of useful dialogues we had been able to facilitate with the minister during his time in office. Would he be back after the election to continue his good work?

At our Conservative party conference dinner last October, the minister was challenged by Westminster city councillor and deputy leader Robert Davis, who



POLITICAL VIEW

**Susan
Freeman**

Partner,
Mishcon
de Reya



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suggested that the role of housing minister was used as “a stepping stone to better things”. The minister responded that he liked his job and would be happy to continue in it after 7 May.

This turned out to be prescient as it has now been confirmed that he will indeed continue in the role. It has been refreshing to have a minister responsible for the important portfolios of housing and planning with the practical and commercial experience of running a business and a local authority, who has been accessible to the property sector and prepared to listen to its issues.

With the vital importance of finding solutions to the

housing crisis acknowledged by all parties in their election campaigns, it would have been a step forward if the role of housing minister had been elevated to a cabinet post to reflect this.

During the long run-up to the election, we came to terms with the possibility of mansion tax, rent controls and loss of non-dom status, all of which caused varying degrees of concern while we waited for the outcome.

The night before the election, constitutional law was elevated to new heights as *The Times* splashed a front page story about the Queen’s role in the event of a hung parliament. The ensuing election result shows that democracy works in mysterious ways.

Now, instead of discussing the uncertainties of a hung parliament, our constitutional experts will be guiding us through the intricacies and potential consequences of the European question, the Scottish question, the English question and devolution.

All these issues will provide for interesting post-election debate and the appointment of Greg Clark as communities secretary is hopefully an indication that devolution and our cities will be high on the new government’s agenda.