

Ukraine

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Western policy has failed towards Ukraine. The UN did on a majority vote condemn the Russian actions and called for the restoration of Crimea to Ukraine, The Western powers rightly did not seek to claim Crimea back by military intervention. To this day they have said Crimea should be returned but have ruled out military involvement. It would kill too many people, and it would be difficult to impose Kiev and EU rule on many people of Russian origin in Crimea who prefer Russian rule.

All this is topical again because some other parts of Eastern Ukraine are in revolt against Kiev rule and have sympathies for Russia. Russian troops have been massed on the frontiers. The West led by President Biden has told Russia not to invade and has threatened penal sanctions were they to do so. What is clearly needed is a political solution in Eastern Ukraine that works for its people. The eastern voters have little chance of winning an countrywide election in Ukraine any more, unlike 2010, because their numbers have ben reduced by the loss of Crimea.

Ukraine is the political battleground between EU and Russian influences in Eastern Europe. The EU and US misjudged the situation badly in Crimea when they pressed the EU Association Agreement against the wishes of the then President and lost a part of the country. They need to be careful not to misjudge again.

Brexit at the Environment Department.

The good news at the Environment Department is they did grasp the big opportunity that leaving the EU offers when it comes to ending our involvement with the Common Agricultural policy. Over the years it inflicted

considerable damage on the UK. It left us short of milk quotas, shrinking our dairy industry and forcing us to import more milk based products. It prolonged the hit from BSE on our beef cattle. It paid grants to get UK farmers to rip out orchards so we imported more continental fruit. It paid large grants to successful large scale arable farmers that we did not need to pay. The UK lost considerable market share in temperate foods. The Dutch took over our flower market and came to dominate salads, the Spanish the vegetables market, the Danes the pig meat market. Most of the CAP is being swept aside.

The not so good news is the delay in putting in a replacement, and the absence of strong policies to promote more UK food production. For a department which wants to be green there is a surprising lack of interest in cutting the food miles. There are no dedicated schemes to give grants to farmers to create the orchards we have lost or to put in competitive capacity to the Dutch green houses for market gardening. There are expensive schemes to take land out of agricultural use altogether to make us more import dependent for food.

The Department is promoting more tree planting., which is fine. It needs to encourage more sustainable forestry, as what we need to do is grow more of our own roof trusses and floors, more of our own biomass for power stations and wood for furniture production.

The Department is doing little to recreate a healthy and sustainable fishery run by UK based fishing vessels and crews.

How to cut energy prices

it sounds as if the government does now think it has to act to cushion the impact of energy bills on household budgets in April. It also sounds as if they will let the price go up, so they will probably determine to route more taxpayer cash to lower income families through benefits and tax credits. Alternatively they will subsidise energy companies to keep bills down. This would be a dearer route but would help more bill payers.

What they need to do is to solve the underlying problem of a shortage of energy. Our electricity system is too reliant on wind and solar which can drop off to very little power when the weather changes. They need to keep more of the fossil fuel capacity we currently have as back up. They need to install more reliable green generation with more hydro, biomass and nuclear. Depending more and more on unreliable imports means paying peak prices at times of general shortage with adverse effects on bills.

The government as argued here before needs to licence new gas and oil from U.K. sources. It is not green to ban domestic production only to rely on more carbon intensive imports of coal and gas instead. The U.K. could follow the

US model of lower gas prices with plenty of home production rather than the European model of very high prices, gas scarcity and reliance on Russian imports.

It is far from helpful that the government will end up with higher benefits, more subsidies and higher public spending because they have allowed a severe shortage of gas to emerge. Cutting our stockholding capacity and our domestic output comes with a dear price.

Getting Brexit done

The Conservative Manifesto of 2019 promised to get Brexit done. It stated the government would "take the whole country out of the EU as one United Kingdom". We would leave the Customs Union, be able to pass our own laws and end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. "There will be no political alignment with the EU". We would take back control of our laws, our money and trade policy, and ensure we are in full control of our fishing waters.

The central offer was to "use our new post Brexit freedoms to transform the UK for the better by focusing on your priorities".

In some blogs in the days ahead I will examine how far the government has got in implementing this vision, and how we can take advantage of our new freedoms to do better. At the time of the Withdrawal Agreement I drew attention to issues over Northern Ireland trade and fishing, and was told by Ministers these would be sorted out for in the final Agreement. I was not satisfied they were so I did not vote for the final Agreement.

I am pleased that the government now recognises that the trade position for Northern Ireland is entirely unsatisfactory and needs substantial change. I urge them to take action to enforce the clear statements in the Northern Ireland Protocol that both sides respect the internal market of the UK and regard Northern Ireland as part of that market and customs Union. The Protocol condemns diversion of trade, yet we are witnessing a major diversion of trade from GB to NI to EU to NI. The UK should instruct our Customs officials to allow free passage of goods from GB to NI as we do within the rest of the UK, if necessary confirming the instruction to them in UK legislation and making clear this is the UK interpretation of the NI Protocol. The UK Act should also confirm UK sovereignty over NIU/GB trade and exclude any role for the ECJ.

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