

University entrance

The emergence of many more higher grades in this year's A level results has produced problems for universities used to a higher failure rate to achieve required grades. Some courses at some universities are as a result oversubscribed and the Universities are having to make offers for the following year or encourage some other switching to try to resolve the difficulty.

I was a product of a different system for Oxford and Cambridge. Before or after A level Oxford and Cambridge set entrance and scholarship exams which they used rather than A level results.

The advantage of this system was twofold. The Universities were in full control of how many places they allocated and who would get them. The student if successful could press on to prepare more thoroughly for higher level study. The Colleges made their own judgements. Later as a young Oxford university teacher I became involved in the marking process for the entrance exams. I was impressed by the system. We blind double marked the papers, held conversations about all the ones where we disagreed, and used interviews to expose the issues where we did disagree about the achievement and potential of the candidate. We also sought to redress any unfair imbalance between students who had been well prepared by expensive schools for the ordeal and those who had not.

It looks as if some top universities are tiptoeing back to relying more on their own assessment of students. They need to be sure that the people they take can cope with the rigours and the independence of undergraduate study and are the best of the many who now achieve a grade A.

A Level and GCSE results

Congratulations to all those who have done well and obtained the grades they wanted in the recent assessments for national qualifications. Schools in the constituency have produced good results, allowing more young people to move into the 6th Form in a positive spirit or to go on to the university of their choice. Well done to all the schools and teachers who have helped their students to a good outcome.

Let Alok Sharma as chairman and deal maker fly to meetings, but how many others?

The establishment elite that perform the rites and fashion the weapons of the war on carbon are in danger of slipping into the bad practices of some past priesthoods. The officials and grandees tell us they need to fly around the world to conferences like COP 26 to spread the word. I can see the case for the chairman of the global conference to meet key players face to face in their own settings to try to do a deal, but the case for others is by no means clear. Too many fly around the world to tell others not to fly but to holiday near to home and to communicate on Zoom or Teams. When challenged about their own lifestyles which seem detached from Mission Net Zero they reply that it is fine because they are “offsetting” all the carbon their flights, chauffeured cars, air conditioned hotels and meat banquets generate. In other words they use taxpayers money to grant aid activities like tree planting or renewable power installation to claim a carbon offset.

As one of leading advocates of net Zero, Bill Gates helpfully explains in his book “I own big houses and fly in private planes- in fact I took one to Paris for the climate change conference – so who am I to lecture anyone on the environment?” “It’s true that my carbon footprint is absurdly high. .. In 2020 I started buying sustainable jet fuel and will fully offset my family’s aviation missions in 2021. For our non aviation emissions I am buying offsets through a company that runs a facility that removes carbon dioxide from the air”. At least Bill Gates uses his own money to offset that carbon footprint and grasps that others might see it differently.

I am disappointed that COP26 is not a virtual conference. The combination of the messaging on jet travel and the wish of many governments to restrict jet travel to stop the spread of covid would seem to make a strong case for a virtual meeting. There will be critics who will not be easily assuaged by knowledge of carbon offsets. There will also be plenty of examination of the nature of those carbon offsets to see if they are genuine and not being miscounted.

The efforts to place a price on carbon are creating inflation in various green investments as well as the more useful boosting of investment in things like trees and renewable power. They are also leading governments into seizing another new way of taxing us, by placing carbon taxes and carbon border taxes on items we need.

Governments need to explain how they will tax non fossil fuels in the world they want where they lose most of the tax on oil and gas. They also need to set out where all the electrical power is coming up from to fuel the electrical revolution.

Earley BBQ

On Saturday evening it was good to join local members of the Conservative party for a BBQ in Earley. There was a good range of questions about the pandemic, vaccinations, economic recovery, housing and planning. I also talked a bit about levelling up and ways of getting the NHS back to full running for non covid treatments.

The US retreat from Afghanistan

The news from Afghanistan is worrying. Twenty years after the first military actions by the US and her allies in Afghanistan President Biden announced a rapid withdrawal of US forces. I have no disagreement with the aim of getting out. I agree that the UK also had to leave quickly as soon as the larger US force left. We were a smaller part of a coalition force and had to think of the safety of our forces in a volatile situation. I do have a disagreement with the sudden speed of the USA planned departure, and the apparent shortcomings in reassuring the Afghan government and leaving in place enough advice and support to make their task easier.

It is surprising that given the longer term cross party aim in the USA to leave defence and policing to Afghan forces that more successful plans were not already effective for advice and training of the now considerable Afghan forces. A lot of effort had we are told gone in to allow them to handle any insurgency or violent subversion of the state. There was a good argument to say that keeping foreign forces there for too long to suppress violence could be seen by some Afghans as a provocation that helped recruit more opponents against democratic government. There was an even better argument that at some point to prove Afghanistan has become a self sustaining democracy it has to be left to Afghan people and institutions to defend its new order and to subsume critics within a democratic system to resolve or handle differences. They can of course ask for advice or specialist help from allies, but Afghan forces should take full responsibility for law and order.

Russia and now NATO have found Afghanistan a difficult place for operations. President Biden seems to lack a clear vision of what if any role he wishes the USA to assume in the Middle East. We know he is not as pro Israel and as anti Iran as President Trump, but we do not yet know what he is trying to achieve and how he sees the new threats instability bring in the region.