

Levelling up

On Thursday the PM gave a speech setting out his vision of levelling up. It rightly concentrated on the differences in lives in different parts of our country, drawing attention to big variations in average life expectancy, in likelihood of getting a degree and obtaining a well paid job, and the differences in ability to buy a decent home. The speech both accepted that governments of all persuasions in the post 1945 world have tried to reduce these inequalities, and that the divergencies have remained.

The new ground in the speech was the understanding that successive governments have in practice reinforced the success of the richer areas, drawing ever more talent into places like central London . This has led to the need to invest heavily in public transport and other public services there to cater for all the extra numbers going to work and living in such places. In a vivid topical analogy he said investment has followed success creating a world where you “hang around the goalmouth rather than being the playmaker”. The draw of London has meant many people facing long, expensive and often vexatious commutes, and relentless pressure for more housing investment and development in the South East. As a result two thirds of the country’s graduates from the top 30 universities end up in London.

He was clear that a socialist egalitarian agenda which entails levelling down as well as levelling up is not the way to go. “We should not want to decapitate the tall poppies. We don’t think you make the poor parts of the country richer by making the rich parts poorer”. What you need is more of the potential playmakers to stay in or move to other cities that can as London does attract talent, investment and new jobs.

The big issue is how we help create these new success stories. The digitalisation of the UK is part of the answer, where the PM tells us 60% now enjoy the benefits of faster broadband, up from 7% two years ago. I will return to these issues and examine the government proposals to help level up. Central to it all, as this speech states, is to help many more people on their personal journeys to success, to home ownership, to business creation or to better skilled and better paid jobs.

My speech during the debate on the Northern Ireland Protocol

As long ago as 2016, the British people voted to take back control. We voted to re-establish our sovereignty. The last Parliament sought to subvert and undermine that view. In 2019, given the opportunity, the British public voted again, by a substantial margin, to take back control. They elected, with a

decent majority, a Government of a party pledged to do just that, and this Government moved with speed and purpose to take back control. Unfortunately, we still need to debate this matter today because of the conduct of the European Union. There is outstanding business. We still have not taken back proper control in Northern Ireland or over our fishing grounds. I am glad to take the opportunity provided by this Back-Bench debate to urge the Government to fully implement the mandate of the British people given to them both in the referendum and in the general election to take back that control.

I have been angered, but not surprised, by the conduct of the European Union. There is a long history of the European Union antagonising neighbours and potentially friendly states and attempting to use distorted, twisted or simply wrong legal arguments to force things in its own direction against the interests of its neighbours. The EU, in the long negotiations with the UK, always said that it respected the UK's wish to restore its sovereignty and did not wish to deny it, and yet here we have a case where the EU is trying to wrestle our sovereignty away from us in an important part of our country. The EU always promised to respect our internal market, as is reflected in the agreements that we are currently discussing, yet now it wishes to hijack it. It wishes to divert a substantial proportion of GB-to-Northern Ireland trade to the EU for its purposes against the spirit and the letter of the agreement.

Above all, the EU promised to respect the peace agreement. It went on and on about an imaginary border that the UK had no intention of making more complicated or more difficult, and denying the actual border that was already there that was necessary for its purposes and the UK's purposes for taxation, currency and regulatory matters. It has gone out of its way to antagonise the loyalist majority community in Northern Ireland. That is the very opposite of working with us to promote the peace and to reduce the tensions within those important communities.

So what should we do now? Our Government have shown enormous tolerance, restraint and flexibility. I make no secret of the fact that I would not have shown as much flexibility or restraint as they have done, because I am already very angry about the EU's conduct. But they are right that we need to show that we have tried to negotiate a settlement. I hope they will have one more go at trying to get the EU to agree to a common-sense approach to these border issues whereby proper trade can be sustained and promoted so that GB-NI trade is also restored and not interfered with by the EU, because that was never part of the idea behind the original agreement.

I hope the Government will have success in these matters, but we do need to be ready now, as soon as possible, to make our own decisions and to make our own moves if the EU is not yet ready to negotiate a sensible solution. There are several on offer in this debate and in the discussions that have been held over the years. The agreement makes it clear that we can indeed move unilaterally and assert our sovereignty where our internal market is being violated and trade is being diverted, and where there are other failures by the EU to comply with the agreement, which are now several and manifest.

I say to the Government: do not delay over the whole of this summer. Take

action now. The trade is being diverted now. The community sentiments are being disrupted now. The peace agreement is being wobbled now. The sovereignty of the United Kingdom is being deeply infringed now. There is plenty of evidence for that, and a good case can be made in the court of world opinion for those who are interested. But this is, above all, a matter between the Government and the British people—the people of the United Kingdom as a whole. We, the Parliament of the United Kingdom, owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to ensure that they are fully part of our single market and country, just as we wish them, with us, to have friendly and good trading relations with the EU.

But if there has to be a choice between peace and our internal matters on the one hand, and our trade with the EU on the other, of course we must put Northern Ireland, peace and the integrity of our country first, whatever threats the EU may make. The EU is the disrupter of trade; the UK is the promoter of free trade worldwide. The EU is the one that is doing harm to the constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland. We must be rock-fast in our support for the people of Northern Ireland, for the constitution of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, and for a good solution that allows the restoration of our internal market.

[The Northern Ireland Protocol](#)

Yesterday a group of MPs held a debate about the Northern Ireland Protocol. The Conservatives who secured the debate topic all argued the same case. The NI Protocol was meant to be a temporary measure. Its clause 16 allows either party to make unilateral changes if the Protocol ceases to work as intended. It is meant to respect both the EU single market and the UK internal market. The Agreement stipulates it should not be used to divert trade, yet the EU is doing exactly that and claiming it is doing that at the moment by seeking to make GB/NI trade very difficult and NI/EU trade easier.

We all believe the government is right to try to negotiate a fix and we support the detailed proposals submitted to allow both sides to proceed by mutual enforcement. The UK would ensure anything that was at risk of moving from GB to the EU via Northern Ireland would be submitted to the correct EU checks. The bulk of GB/NI trade is internal UK trade and that would be subject to UK only supervision, using trusted trader schemes, electronic manifests, checks away from the border and the rest of the techniques we use for trade within GB. The EU would for its part ensure non compliant or tax dodging goods did not find their way from the Republic to NI. There are well established co-operation procedures for tackling smuggling as there was always a goods border to supervise. The NI/Republic border when we were in the EU was an excise, VAT and currency border but that did not require border posts and cash settlements at the border.

We also believe that the EU is not minded to discuss these things in a reasonable and co-operative way. It is therefore time for the UK to make a unilateral move to assert UK control only over internal UK trade, whilst ensuring respect for the EU single market for any exports from Northern Ireland over the land border. This is quite legal under Article 16 of the NIP , let alone under Clause 38 of the Withdrawal Act which allows the assertion of UK sovereignty where needed.

The path to net zero in transport

Yesterday the UK government published its 220 page document on how it wishes to transform the way we and our goods get about. At its heart was a contradiction. The early paragraphs promise us “it’s not about stopping people doing things: it’s about doing the same things differently. We will still drive on improved roads, but only in zero emission cars”. The vision is of keeping the flexibility of personal road transport with that still be the dominant way of getting about. There will also be new planes to offer good value flights with carbon free fuels so no need to rein in the holidays abroad.

Whoever wrote that bit did not bother to order a rewrite of the rest of the document. A bit further on we are told the opposite. “We must make public transport, cycling and walking the natural first choice for all who can take it”. We are offered a world of car sharing, car clubs and much less car use, alongside a target that “half of all journeys in towns and cities” are to be walking or cycling by 2030. The plan confirms their wish to end all new diesel and petrol van and car sales from 2030, all fossil fuel lighter HGVs from 2035 and the rest from 2040.

In some areas under direct government control the plan lacks the same crusading energy. We are only offered a net zero railway by 2050, even though it is already heavily electrified. There will still be diesel trains in 2039. We are promised a railfreight growth target which could relieve our main roads and help a great deal in many ways, but there is no agreed one in this document from the government and the railway , currently effectively nationalised. There is no date yet decided for the phase out of fossil fuel buses, with non fossil fuel fleets still at the demonstration city and project stage.

We are told that “We will continue to support demand for zero emissions vehicles through a a (sic) package of financial and non financial incentives”. Given the millions of vehicles they want replaced that could prove very costly.

I am all in favour of more freight going by rail. That requires work on smaller track bypasses and extensions, new sidings and branch lines into industrial parks, and new depots. I am all in favour of new electric cars and

vans once they are seen by more of the public as better than the diesel and petrol versions and are attractively priced by the market so they fly off the shelves. More work is needed on this strategy, with more reassurance about what its aims are. Transport is crucial to our lives, central to our food and goods supply, crucial to services provided to us and vital for many of our jobs. People will want to know the change planned does not make these things worse for us.

My speech during the debate on English Votes for English Laws

England deserves better. England expects better. It is a sad occasion that this Government should wish to dismiss the only modest devolution ever offered to England, with nothing to put in its place. They leave instead Labour's lopsided and unfair devolution, a devolution proposed and forced through a previous Parliament, on a large majority, by a Labour party that said it would settle the constitution and unite the country behind the Union once and for all. It did nothing of the sort.

Surely this Government can now see that if they carry on, as Labour did, appeasing the forces that would pull the Union asunder, they will not bring the Union together but give those forces greater strength and a better platform. Instead of Scottish electors welcoming their devolved powers and deciding to continue in the traditional mould of two United Kingdom parties contesting power, they chose a party that wishes to pull the Union apart. Some of them chose that party because they thought the Government would give in to it, and so get a better deal for Scotland; and some of them chose that party because they genuinely wanted to pull the Union apart, although they were, of course, in a minority.

The Government and I treasure our United Kingdom. We wish this Union to work for everyone, but it has to be a fair Union. It will not be held together better by appeasing the SNP or by appeasing the EU over Northern Ireland. We above all in this House should be speaking up for all the millions of Unionists in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and throughout England and Wales, who expect better and expect fairness.

One of the crucial values that our United Kingdom shares is that idea of fairness. How is it fair to have these totally different categories of MP, with different powers, different responsibilities and different opportunities to influence how they are governed in their parts of the United Kingdom? Why is it that England, the home of many more millions of Unionists and more loyal to our country than anyone else in our Union, is the one part of the Union that gets no justice and no fairness from this Government or their predecessors?

Labour introduced policies that sought to break the Union in the name of keeping the Union. I want this Government to mend the Union, and that means standing behind all those people throughout the United Kingdom who believe in the Union, and to stop appeasing those who would pull it apart.