

Wokingham Town Centre

I was pleased to see more people about enjoying the new town centre on Bank Holiday Monday. Cafes and eating places were particularly popular with many sitting out in the sunshine. I visited some shops to see how they are getting on now we have had some relaxation of pandemic rules.

More of the new units are trading. Those who have not been recently should go and have a look for themselves. We need to use our town shops and services, and give them a boost after lock down.

In praise of the car

For many young people passing their driving test is an important rite of passage to adulthood. Acquiring your first vehicle is a major advance in your personal freedom.. Yet today government, Councils and better off greens from the security of their homes in major cities lecture the rest of us on the wickedness of the car. The better off Green city dweller can rely more on the tube or mass transit and has the money for taxis when needed. The aim is to get people out of car ownership or to reduce their use of the car, and in the meantime to cow people into keeping quiet about their reliance on this flexible and most popular form of transport.

Many Councils work away to make their localities hostile to car traffic, blocking off roads, and deliberately creating unsafe juxtapositions of bus lanes and cycleways with highway, and altering junctions to increase tensions between different road users. I have recently reviewed the many journeys I need to make for work, for shopping and for social and pleasure purposes. All the ones I need to do in my home constituency area either cannot be done by train, or if attempted by train would take me between three times and ten times as long depending on the distance I needed to walk from the destination station, the frequency of the timetable and whether I needed first to go into Reading by train to then get out on another line. All these trips would also be dearer given the relative marginal costs of each mode of travel. Like many people I conclude if the train option is both much longer and dearer it is not a sensible choice. Added to that how would I manage a weekly shop on the train and carrying the groceries to and from stations. In Central London I do mainly walk or use the tube where the shorter distances and the regularity of the trains makes those the best options now the roads have been so blocked and parking removed or priced so high.

Most people in my local area come to the conclusion they mainly use the car. Many take the children to school by car unless they live close to the school. They go on to their place of work in the car because most offices, shops and factories are not near a station. They take the family to a cafe or restaurant by car because it easier with many of the family items they might

need in the car already. They visit Granny by car because Sunday transport services are so poor.

Sensible Councils understand we need to live with the car. Its flexibility is the ally of better town centres and shopping areas if the Council allows easy access and cheap or free parking. It is the ally of young people being able to enjoy their lives and make more social contacts, it is the friend of events, theatres and concerts wanting people to get back from them at hours of less public transport, and the stand by means to tackle many emergencies for a family. The car can get you to the chemist, the doctor or to the direct rescue of a family member in trouble.

Sensible car policy means designing junctions that encourage freer flow and segregates different types of road user to make them safer. It means building a better local network of strategic roads designed with the needs of the van, truck and car driver in mind, allowing more time and attention for pedestrians, bikes and buses on other local roads. Above all it needs more capacity to ease congestion and tensions on the ever popular roads.

Governments local and national will discover that if they make it too difficult to get about by car there will be a voter backlash. The polls may tell us people want to use their cars less and are worried about air quality, safety and other important issues. If you look however at what people are actually doing they are relying more and more on their cars to buy the food, get to school and work and have some fun. Even before all lockdown is lifted traffic levels are back to pre pandemic levels whilst train and bus travel is struggling to get back to 50% of former levels.

[What I learn from contributors here](#)

Remain supporters get very angry when I write careful moderate independent analysis of EU policy and progress. They write in to say no one is interested and that now we have left I should stay out of EU matters. Meanwhile site visits and comments offered usually go up. This reflects the stark absence of informed comment, factual explanation or debate about the politics of the EU and its member states on the U.K. media. We are given ring side seats for Trump/Biden but kept out of Laschet versus Baerbock or Macron / Le Pen. I will continue to read about the important decisions being made by our near neighbours and may strengthen my coverage given the need.

The main aim of Remain journalists and campaigners seems to be to try to block any of the many Brexit benefits including FTAs with the rest of the world to try to vindicate a pessimistic view of our leaving the EU. They ally this to trying to suppress any of the bad news about the EU which makes up the normal diet of media presented news on other countries in the U.K. media. They much prefer bad news about the U.K.

Leave supporters are keen on comment about the evolution of our free trade policies and the obstacles posed by the Northern Ireland protocol. There is a

strong view the U.K. government must assert the primacy of the Good Friday Agreement and the defence of the U.K. internal market in the Protocol. There is enthusiasm to get on with Free Trade Agreements with the rest of the world.

There is a tendency by contributors to see conspiracies where often there is merely incompetence, herd thinking or institutional inertia. I decline to publish the most elaborate conspiracy theories. I recommend people who hold them to concentrate on campaigning against the policies and actions they dislike, as it is still possible to change policies which they think are rigged invisibly behind the democratic facade. If they have evidence of wrong doing by powerful people they need to go to the authorities with evidence. This site is not equipped or financed to take on vendettas against named individuals.

There is considerable interest in green issues, where I am striving to set out a popular and practical agenda whilst highlighting the costs and dangers of some of the top down government knows best proposals.

There is usually least interest in the bits of economic analysis I offer. This is a pity as I have more ability to deliver original ideas, analysis and good forecasts in this area. Once again the EU divide gets in the way as Remain people resent my correct past opposition to the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and to U.K. membership of the Euro. It leads them to contradict whatever I say about current economic policy and theory. I would urge them to move on and engage on the merits of the contemporary arguments and data.

I would be interested in readers views on the balance of topics and viewpoints.

[The EU falls out over the pace and cost of net zero](#)

The EU intends to improve its offer to the world for its progress to net zero. It plans a 55% reduction in output of carbon dioxide compared to 1990 levels which will require tough action to cut fossil fuel use in transport, homes and industry.

It has led to various disputes. Should the lower income countries be allowed laxer targets than the richer ones, who arguably are better able to pay for a fast transition? Will there be substantial solidarity funds to help pay the costs of change from EU funds for the poorer countries?

Should the EU carbon trading scheme be extended from electricity and general industry to cover personal transport and home heating? If so how high would the carbon price go, cutting the living standards of all who were hit by the

new carbon penalties? Are the voters of EU states now ready to pay more directly for car and boiler use, on top of the extra indirect costs already imposed through electricity and general industrial product prices?

German opinion is getting more and more concerned about the possible expansion of a transfer Union, where Germany will be expected to pay more to help countries like Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy. It is also worried about the extent of ECB buy up of the bonds of the weaker countries of the Union to keep interest costs down. The next ECB meeting and the next EU Council in June are going to be important meetings about far the EU plans to go down the road of fuller financial integration, binding Germany in to accept more the debts and obligations of poorer countries and more of the high costs of the road to net zero. Germany is also unwilling to phase out its coal industry and coal power stations this decade.

State trading monopolies often serve us badly

Choice, innovation and competitive challenge drive higher living standards and better goods and services. Private monopolies can wallow in complacency, knowing they can charge enough to suit them and not feeling any great need to improve or change. State monopolies seek to persuade us that their pursuit of the public sector ethos allows them to rise above the complacency and poor quality of monopoly, yet so often as with British Rail or the nationalised energy and water utilities they did not do so. Nationalised industries often charged a lot, passed inefficiencies on in ever higher prices, sacked employees instead of finding new jobs for them from growth and innovation, and sent big bills to taxpayers as well.

One of the worst features of nationalised industries or of heavily state regulated utilities is the way they fail to supply enough of what they are meant to provide. The nationalised water industry used to introduce water rationing in any hot dry summer. They saw no duty to supply water to us to keep our vegetable plot alive or to support the flowers in a good July. The regulated utilities we now have are prevented from providing comfortable extra capacity by controls over the amount of permitted investment spending, so we remain on a knife edge of supply should we ever have the joy of a long hot dry summer again like 1976. They are not even encouraged to add to capacity to deal with the large rise in migrant numbers in the last two decades.

The nationalised railway specialised in cutting back track and routes. The Beeching cuts were the worst example, but the process of retreat in services and slimming the workforce was remorseless. It always argued it could not make sufficient capacity available for the crucial commuting demand that was

its passenger mainstay, condemning generations of commuters to standing room only, to crowded trains and poor services. The regulated partly private industry of recent years has allowed some good growth, but prior to the big change of the pandemic measures there was still inadequate capacity on many important commuter lines at peak.

The worst example of deliberate shortage of supply is the monopoly provision of roadspace. Local and national highways management has persevered with ancient narrow streets and been slow to build a comprehensive network of motorways, by passes and trunk roads to keep more of the traffic away from homes and High Streets. Some argue this is the green option, yet it means many more vehicles stuck in traffic jams, more pollution near where people live and less fuel economy. It is also a lot less safe, encouraging more tensions between vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians on mixed narrow roads.

The telephone industry was way behind US technology and coverage when it was privatised and opened to some competition. It caught up well, and has shown considerable ability to handle vast increases in data and download demands in recent months, though there is still need for more fibre into homes. The highly regulated electricity industry now leaves our country short of power and dangerously dependent on imports for no good reason. Given the government's ambitions for an electrical revolution putting in a lot more power capacity into generation and distribution must be a crucial priority.

As the government seeks to interpret its version of the fashionable Build back better mantra it should make substantial increases in capacity in our main networks and utility provision central to that task.