

Housing numbers for Wokingham

I gave a Radio Berkshire interview this morning about the housing numbers. I explained that there are no settled numbers for the next Plan period. The current government consultation is about how to calculate the numbers. I am responding with a different proposal that would enable Wokingham to set a reduced growth rate in new homes after the extensive development of the current local plan.

The main point I am stressing is the need for the government to set a new planning policy which helps levelling up. Levelling up means more of the substantial investment in new homes should go to the parts of the country that need and want the jobs and money which such a stimulus brings. The Housing Minister has just published an article saying the illustrative numbers around the Consultation will not be the actual numbers and saying they want there to be local input into the totals. We need to hold them to that and help them come up with a better system that respects local wishes.

Levelling up and planning

The government wishes to see 300,000 house a year built, largely by the private sector. This would amount to an annual investment of say £50 billion in their construction.

We have held the debates before about migration and numbers. Today I wish to discuss the issues the government is consulting on. The consultation is not about migration and just assumes large house numbers.

The issue is where should such a large number of homes be placed? The government has recently issued a couple of Planning policy documents. I wrote about the main one here, eliciting little interest.

The second one is a series of proposals for immediate rather than longer term reform of our planning system. It sets out a new method for calculating housing need which in turn would inform housing targets for each Council in the country.

The base position seems sensible, suggesting a 0.5% increase in existing stock in each Council area each year. This would provide a reasonable number of new homes everywhere allowing some flexibility to home buyers. There is then an added "affordability" formula or algorithm to increase these numbers, as 0.5% leaves the country well short of the government's own 300,000 target.

The adoption of this proposal produces a strange result. Instead of adding to the housing stock in the places where the government wishes to level up,

their numbers are cut. Instead of reducing the flow of more investment and better paid people into the areas that are already well above average in prosperity and employment, they are scored to need many more. The estimates of the impact suggest Sussex would see a 127% increase and Surrey an 83% increase whilst the North East would have a fall of 28%.

I suggest the government thinks again lest this algorithm proves as troublesome as the exams one. We need a levelling up one, where more homes are built in those places which want the investment.

Housing numbers in Wokingham

I am making the case for a slower rate of development for our area as the Council moves to prepare a new local plan. I am responding to the government's latest consultation on planning issues and will follow up my written submission with a meeting with the Minister.

A new fishing policy

There was no slot for me to speak in the fishing debate yesterday in the Commons, such was the understandable pressure from MPs for fishing seats to speak.

What I wanted to say included the following

1. The government must not sacrifice our fish for the sake of some wider deal. The UK feels very strongly that we have been badly treated over fish from the original entry terms onwards. The Common Fishery Policy has been bad for our fish, bad for our fishing industry and bad for the marine environment.
2. When we take back control we should greatly expand the amount our own fishing fleets can catch, and require most if not all of the fish from our fishing grounds to be landed in the UK. We need to build a bigger fish processing and retailing industry.
3. The government should ban the ultra large predatory trawlers which damage the sea bed or the wider marine environment when scrambling to catch more fish, and attract too much bycatch as they do so.
4. We should strengthen our onshore protection vessel fleet to enforce our fishing rules, protecting our marine environment and managing our fish stocks well.
5. The new fishing policy should encourage a rapid expansion of our fishing

fleets, with government help with the financing of suitable vessels and encouragement to the banks to lend for the purpose.

6. The new fishing policy should be part of a wider policy initiative to encourage far greater food self sufficiency and fewer food miles.

Time for change at the BBC

I wrote this last week for Free market Conservatives and am now reproducing it here:

The BBC are their own worst opponents. Their recent cancellation of a couple of much loved old songs that are famous worldwide and have not before caused protests led many of their former BBC news/Radio 4 audience to anger or despair. They are so dominated by the fashionable global political correctness and by the briefings from the EU and international bodies that they can no longer relate to the many in the UK who like our country, are at peace with most of its past and just wish to be entertained. They are ready to run any cause which wants more government, higher taxes, more spending by the state, more submission to international treaty rules and more dependence on EU suppliers. They revel in allegations of inequality and unfairness, whilst seeking to remove their own high payments to some talent from the full public gaze. Their constant cry is government should do something. They tend to see business as a source of stories of overpayment and possible corruption, and show scorn for anyone who does not share their corporate values.

Last Saturday morning I made the mistake of listening to the Radio 4 Briefing Room programme about the EU/UK talks. For half an hour they paraded so called experts and BBC correspondents who gave us yet another tedious version of Project Fear. There was no attempt at any balance. No-one spoke for the UK and no-one spoke of the many advantages Brexit can bring. The overarching perspective was that supplied by the EU. There was no attempt to cross examine the EU position and ask about the risks to their big export trade into the UK and our opportunity to substitute UK produced product or cheaper rest of the world product with freedom from EU tariffs. There was no attempt to explore the big upside possible for more food grown and reared in the UK, nor of the way world competition will also affect EU suppliers where we do not have a domestic industry to protect. The importance and opportunity for our fishing industry was dismissed, though they did think fishing was important totemically for French and Spanish fishermen! It was as if they had joined the EUBC and had decided not to bother about the views of a majority of the UK licence payers.

The BBC's charter requires the BBC to be neutral and to allow a wide range of views and arguments to be put. Their news coverage does seek to give most political party representatives a hard time, and during elections in particular they are careful to observe the rules over representation. That

does not make their overall output balanced. For years studies showed the BBC gave plenty of easy airtime to those who wished to make the case for the UK's membership of the EU, but gave far less time to those who wanted to leave. Those who did get on were interrupted, heckled and often presented in an unfavourable way as if their democratic cause was unworthy or absurd. Once the people had voted to leave the BBC would still not accept the verdict, and delighted in giving maximum exposure to the minority representing the global political establishment who wished to undermine or reverse the decision. Many of their storylines come from the Guardian and from Labour and Lib Dem research. They do not offer a similar range of stories for all those seeking to reduce taxes, expand prosperity through enterprise, query the conduct of nationalised monopolies and challenge the global consensus on major issues. To many in the BBC President Obama's substantial bombing campaigns were fine, but some of President Trump's tough or one sided statements designed as a substitute for military action are unacceptable.

It means reform of the BBC is in the air. This will be necessary anyway, as we thunder towards a very different media planet where people download much of their entertainment, get news from a range of worldwide instant services, and spend more time on social media than conventional media. The immediate issue is should the licence fee be a normal charge where payment is enforced by civil and not criminal means? How much longer anyway will the licence fee serve their needs, given the way many people can avoid live tv and so claim they do not need to pay it. A simple first reform would be to decriminalise the licence fee and unclutter the courts of the licence fee criminal cases. In other guises the BBC would be against a poll tax. They should think again how best to finance their activities going forwards. What is good public service broadcasting and how much if any should be taxpayer financed?

Let's have a modern proposal. Shouldn't some of the BBC's current more commercial activities be paid for by the audience they can command as for other media outlets? We need a new settlement, with the majority of the country that did vote for Brexit feeling we can be included. The BBC should not offer unfair competition to other media outlets financed by their unique access to a dedicated poll tax.