

Pay rises for valued public sector employees

I was pleased to see today that there has been a further relaxation in public sector pay restraints, to allow rises above inflation for various groups of employees.

- Teachers – the average classroom teacher will see a 2.75 per cent pay increase, worth on average £1,000.
- Armed Forces – a soldier at Corporal level on average wages will see a 2.9 per cent raise worth £995, while the starting salary for an officer will rise by £769.
- NHS – Doctors and dentists will receive an increase of 2.5 per cent, with hospital doctors seeing an average £1,500 more to their salary. Nurses are seeing a pay increase of 6.5 per cent over three years, as agreed as part of a 3-year deal in 2018.
- Police – police constables will see a 2.5 per cent average pay increase, earning up to £978 more this year.
- Prison officers – prison officers will get at least a 2.2 per cent rise this year, with many receiving 3 per cent.

The size of the Royal Navy

In 1804 there were 572 fighting ships in the Royal Navy. The UK was engaged in a series of wars at the time which encouraged government to keep the force strong. In 1939 as war broke out the UK navy had 332 naval vessels. During the war there was a large expansion in the fleet, with 553 new ships added both to replace lost ships and to expand the size of the force. 58 new aircraft carriers were produced during the war years, for example.

Today in a period of relative peace there are just 67 fighting ships in the navy, including 18 small patrol boats with guns.

Chiming our independence

At 11 pm on 31 October the UK becomes an independent nation again, promised by our likely next Prime Minister. Many of us will wish to celebrate this much heralded and delayed event.

You would expect national media to show the countdown to the moment through the movement of the hands on the clock on the Elizabeth Tower at Westminster, known as Big Ben. It is perhaps symbolic that this Parliament which has done so much to try to stop us becoming independent again, and so much to thwart the results of the referendum, should have decided the clock is unavailable on the stated date. We need to find a good alternative to look at.

There are many great public clocks around the UK. Should we turn to Big Brum on the Council House in Birmingham? Or to Manchester Town Hall clock, or Leeds Town Hall, or the Liver building? I invite your thoughts.

It is time for us to be confident as a nation, proud of our democratic traditions and keen to be an outward looking global influence for the good. We will regain our votes and voices on international bodies and be better able to shape our future as we wish.

Some questions to Mrs May and Mr Hunt

I wrote shortly after the Gibraltar authorities seized the Iranian oil tanker about the need for the UK to protect other vessels going through the Straits from retaliatory attack, and asked about the possible prosecution of the Captain and senior officers of the vessel who had been detained with allegations of EU sanctions busting.

We now see a British flagged tanker has been detained by the Iranians with allegations of a collision with a fishing vessel which is denied by those on the tanker, and see that the Captain and officers of the Iranian tanker have been released on bail.

This gives rise to various questions for the UK government

1. Given the very public threat made by Iran to UK shipping in the area, what measures were taken to give protection to British flagged vessels?
2. It is said there are four minesweepers and an amphibious armed naval vessel as well as HMS Montrose in the area, with a destroyer on the way. What if anything can these vessels do to help?
3. What support will the UK receive from the carrier group and amphibious

assault ship group the US navy has in the region?

4. When will the Captain and officers of the Iranian tanker be charged? What more can be published concerning the allegations against the Iranian tanker?

5. As we were told this seizure was made to enforce EU sanctions over oil to Syria, what support is the EU offering? Has the EU proposed a joint naval initiative to protect western shipping in the Straits?

6. Why is the advice now given to avoid the Straits for commercial shipping, when this advice was not given before the tanker seizure?

Wokingham Arts Society Summer Exhibition

Last night I opened the Wokingham Arts Society Summer Exhibition at St. Paul's parish room.

The Exhibition is full of joyful oil and water colour painting, with some great ceramics and wood carvings. There is a lot of local talent that has captured the wonders of nature and the beauty of many places. Wokingham's pubs jostle alongside castles, seaside scenes, birds and animals and holiday destinations in the paintings on display.

I talked about the contribution art can make to our lives and thanked all involved in setting up such a good exhibition which we can share. Paintings are for sale if you want to go along and visit.