

Questions for the government

The government has failed to negotiate an exit that people want, uniting Remain and Leave voters against their so called Withdrawal Agreement. There were many opportunities along the way to negotiate something better which they failed to take.

- 1 Why did the government surrender early on over the issue of negotiating the Withdrawal and the future partnership questions together? That was the clear promise in the Conservative Manifesto which the PM ditched for no good reason.
2. When the issue of money was first raised the UK had a good counter that it did not owe them most of what they demanded. Why did the UK surrender on the money when there is no Treaty base requiring them to do so? Why didn't they follow the logic of their own mantra, "Nothing is agreed until everything is agreed", and demand things in return for offering any ex gratia payments?
3. Why when the issue of the Northern Irish border was first raised, didn't the government explain how this VAT/Excise/currency/anti terrorism border works today, and explain there was no need to impose new barriers at the border to slow down trade in future? Why didn't the UK say it would not itself be imposing new barriers at the border, and advised the EU to make a similar declaration?
4. Why didn't the government ever get round to tabling a comprehensive free trade deal? We know from official EU statements they were receptive to that, but could not negotiate one if the UK refused to table one.
5. When Parliament voted for the Brady compromise, a substantial concession by the Eurosceptics who voted for it, did the government fail to table any of those proposals for dealing with border issue in its talks with the EU?
6. Why now the EU Trade Commissioner has repeated the EU's willingness to have a comprehensive free trade agreement if we just leave will the government still not get on and table one and leave as originally promised? This after all was the MALTHOUSE 2 proposal under the Brady compromise, with considerable support across Conservative MPs.
7. Why did the government abandon the pledge that No deal is better than a bad deal?
8. Why did the government tear up its promise that we would leave on 29 March 2019?

I – and others – offered good advice throughout these negotiations urging the government to be much firmer, to hold to its positions that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed and no deal is better than a bad deal to maximise the UK's negotiating leverage. Instead the government at every turn ignored this good advice and sought to weaken or undermine the UK position by making needless concessions too early. The EU soon realised that as long as they

refused to budge the UK would surrender on all the things the EU wanted to insist on.

It is because the negotiations have been so poor from the UK side that we now must just leave without signing the Withdrawal Treaty. The public understood only too clearly how the UK had to argue its corner and dig in over what we thought was fair. Only the government seemed unable to grasp the basics of how to negotiate.

Ease the squeeze

I have urged this government to ease the double squeeze on the economy. They are hitting it with ever higher taxes, and squeezing it with tighter money. The squeeze has been particularly tough on the housing market and the car market, with the twin tax and credit attacks throttling transactions and hitting jobs in car manufacture, estate agency, removal firms, garages and furnishing businesses.

I have advocated a Brexit bonus budget. I had anticipated this in April following our exit on the promised date of 29 March. Now the government has delayed this, they need to review their economic policy anyway. Staying in the EU does not produce a lift in confidence and activity in the way they seem to think. It certainly does nothing to ease the money and tax squeeze they are deliberately imposing.

The action they should take includes

1. Cutting tax rates where the tax rate now collects less money because it is too high and acts as a deterrent to activity. Stamp Duty has to be brought down. The increased taxes on Buy to let should be cancelled. The rate of CGT on housing should be reduced. Vehicle Excise Duty rates should be returned to pre 2017 budget levels. These measures would bring in more revenue because they would stimulate more activity.
2. Cutting tax rates where there could be a short term loss of revenue. The government should cut all Income Tax rates by 5%, as our Income Tax levels are no longer competitive with the best in the world.
3. Cutting rates where there will be a permanent loss of revenue. The government should legislate to remove all VAT from all green products, in the spirit of Parliament's concerns about environmental matters. The law would have to say we were deliberately and unilaterally derogating from EU law ahead of leaving the EU, given the importance of these environmental issues.

The government also needs to increase spending on schools and social care as a matter of priority.

The Bank of England should reconsider its too tight money policy. The Fed, the Chinese Central Bank and the ECB have all admitted they were over tightening and are taking offsetting measures. Meanwhile the Bank of England takes delight in threatening further tightening. It needs to re introduce facilities for the commercial banks that allow ore lending, and alter its advice on car loans which is damaging the car industry.

The combined effect of these measures will be to increase the deficit compared to current forecasts, as unfortunately my plan to spend the savings on EU account will not be possible all the time our exit is delayed. Assuming we leave in October the extra cost will not be great, as long as we then pocket full savings from the EU programme. I would also use Overseas Aid money for the housing budget to provide the homes new refugees and economic migrants need. This could offset the entire increase in the budget deficit if done on a sensible scale.

Wokingham Post Office

Yesterday again in Wokingham the Post Office was busy, demonstrating insufficient counters and the need to open up the other part of the current building to provide more service. Instead the plans to close it and slim it down in W H Smith continues as if this demand did not exist.

I at last have a meeting with the Minister to put the case against closure again to the government. On Tuesday I will meet her at the Department. I will take that opportunity to present the Petition against closure. I thank the local Labour party who did a lot of the work organising it and collecting signatures during inclement weather in the Town Centre, and to the Conservative Councillors who also supported it.

The petition has over 6000 signatures. It says

“We oppose the plan to close Wokingham Post Office and to franchise the service to WH Smith. The move will damage the provision of services to customers, with a less accessible building, longer queues and waiting times, the loss of experienced staff and will be another blow to Wokingham’s historic character”.

I will explain to the Minister my own views of the problems this plan causes, and set it in the context of an expanding town with more demand for services from the new residents who will soon be moving in.

Should Labour do a deal with Mrs May?

The two main parties in Parliament who commanded 82.5% of the vote in the summer of 2017 managed to get just 56% in the local elections. Both have to think about this amazing fall from grace and what they are going to do about it.

Some of it was brought about by voters who blame the two big parties for failing to sort out Brexit. Leave voters are scandalised that 3 years on the wishes of the people have still not been implemented. Most Leave voters now just want to leave without the Agreement. Some Remain voters see the Agreement as obviously worse than staying in, and want a second referendum or simple cancellation of our notice to quit. Mrs May's dreadful Agreement with the EU has united most Leave and most Remain voters against it, though of course the two sides want a different outcome without the Agreement.

The Labour party is unable to reach friendly unity on what to make its new EU policy. The Leader is understandably reluctant to commit himself to a second referendum. The many Labour MPs representing heavily pro Leave areas in the Midlands and North would find such a policy particularly difficult to support. Meanwhile pro Remain London is urging the party to do all it can to undermine the Brexit vote and to retreat back to some kind of surrogate membership of much of the current EU. The noisy minority who want a second vote still have to say what the question is, or want to ask a pro Remain question, offering two different ways of staying in.

The Conservative party says it wants us to leave as soon as possible, and clearly does not want a second referendum. So far, however, it refuses to just leave and has created the conditions where European elections seem likely. It struggles to explain why the delay was needed and how soon we can get out, and on what terms. Just saying we will leave having signed the Withdrawal Agreement requires an answer to the question why will the Agreement go through after the elections when it didn't go through before them? How does the PM answer the criticism that the Agreement is an Agreement for delay or to stay in the customs union and many other features of the current EU? If all the Eurosceptic Conservatives voted for the Agreement in a fourth vote – which they are not going to do -it would still be defeated without a deal with Labour. The Irish backstop means it continues to weaken the DUP confidence and supply arrangement. The DUP cannot vote for the Agreement as drafted, and the government and EU refuse to renegotiate the Agreement.

So far Labour has shown willing to talk to the government, but is unwilling to simply sign up to the Withdrawal Agreement, understanding how toxic it is with the voters. They have played around with the details of the Political declaration where the EU has said there is some more flexibility. They have not yet come to a view of changes from a possible EU negotiations that Mrs May can accept. The negotiations to get out of the EU with an agreement only start once the Withdrawal Agreement lock in is signed, and would require an agreed common position on all the main issues between Mrs May and Mr Corbyn

with a formal pledge that Mr Corbyn will place a 3 line whip on Labour MPs to push through the necessary legislation.

The big danger for Labour is that Mrs May, now desperate to secure the Agreement, will offer staying in the customs union and keeping the UK under single markets rules and laws as a negotiating aim for the next talks. Were Labour to accept, Labour too becomes responsible for the Withdrawal Agreement. If and when Parliament is shown the legislation to implement that in UK law it will discover how long, complex and binding the provisions of the Agreement are, extending the EU's tentacles back into so many features of UK life and government. It will remind all Labour's Leave voters that it is not in any sense leaving. It will stir up their Remain voters who will stress the superiority of current EU Treaty arrangements over the new arrangements in the new Treaty where we would have no vote or voice over all the laws and regulations the EU will enact for us.

The continent has a tradition now of so called grand coalitions between the main centre left and centre right parties as they no longer have the support to form a government individually. They usually depress the popularity of the junior party still further without adding to the support of the major partner. Quite often they presage a collapse in support for one or both such parties, ushering in new political forces to government at the next election. Labour should study the tragic history of the collapse of the SDP in Germany as the grand coalition partner to Mrs Merkel. They now languish on 16% of the vote.

Signing the Agreement would be part of a joint Conservative/Labour wish to be more European. It might well succeed in making the UK more European with more parties and much lower support for the traditional parties that bend their knee to Brussels.

[More trees please](#)

I have always liked trees. I was brought up on the romance of the English forests – the adventure of Robin Hood in Sherwood, the lovers in Shakespeare's Arden, the beauty of local mixed deciduous tree woods, the walks to see primroses or to retrieve a conker from the forest floor. The landscape looks magnificent when the varied greens of the tree canopy in a wood or the mixed leaves in a coppice or hedgerow punctuate the landscape.

So I welcome the conclusion of the recent Report of the Climate Change Committee that urges us to plant more trees. I am glad the government is pressing ahead anyway with an expanded national forest. I trust also it will find ways to stimulate more tree plantations to deliver the wood we need. It makes little sense to import so much wood from Scandinavia, Canada and elsewhere. It seems particularly absurd to claim it is a green idea to burn so much wood at Drax that has come across the Atlantic in fuel burning ships.

We need more faster growing timber for basic uses and for energy, and some good quality slower growing hardwoods for furniture and construction. The heart of English architecture and shipbuilding was always English oak. We could grow more and use more English oak for a variety of enduring purposes.

I am all in favour of a greener policy than we follow in many respects. I want us to get rid of VAT on green products like insulation, heating controls and draught excluders as soon as we are allowed to out of the EU. I am a strong advocate of more fuel efficiency and better home insulation. I want us to keep more green spaces and gaps between settlements. In my own part of the world the pace of housebuilding and the erosion of countryside is too fast. I want a future plan that is gentler on the landscape. I want more food production at home to cut food miles. I want a fishing policy that is kinder to our fish and to local fishermen and women.

The Climate Change Report contains some important figures. It reminds us that the UK has done more than most to cut CO₂ output, now down by 44% from 1990 levels. The UK consumes 7 tonnes of carbon a head a year compared to the EU's 9, China's 10 and the USA's 20. If we carry on with current targets the UK will increase the average global temperature according to their models by 0.005 degrees C by 2070. They want us to go further so the increase the UK contributes is just 0.001 degrees C.

I want to concentrate on greening the landscape and reducing migration levels to cut the pressure of development on our countryside.