

St George's Day

A happy St George's day to all.

Today England should be celebrating our freedom out of the EU. England voted by 53.4% in favour of Leave, with a large 1.921 million vote margin of Leave over Remain. English voters expected us to be out by now. Once again England has been let down by UK and EU politics.

The negotiations with the EU have reminded us of the way England's wishes are so often ignored or sidelined. There has been no Ministerial or representative voice of England in the negotiations at a time when the Scottish government has been most vocal setting out their views on the topic. The EU itself has always tried to split England up into artificial regions, and has not wished to hear an independent England view.

I have judged trying to reach a rapid and successful conclusion to the UK's exit from the EU is the most important constitutional task confronting us. Once we are out we do need to revisit the issue of England's representation. The Coalition reforms gave us the right to avoid Union legislation placed upon us against our will. We need next to turn to acquiring the ability to initiate measures for England without needing a majority in the Union Parliament, where those issues are devolved to Scotland.

The leadership of the Conservative party

Many members of the Conservative party are feeling let down that we are still not out of the EU. They warmed to the Prime Minister's approach that no deal is better than a bad deal, and accepted her assurance we would be out by 29 March 2019. Many Conservative MPs are unhappy about the plunge in the polls brought on by the news that we might be holding European elections after all, and by the fall in the general polls following announcement of delay in getting out.

There are moves to see if the question of the leadership can be revisited before the expiry of a year since the last confidence vote in Theresa May. Some MPs and some members of the voluntary party with their Associations are looking at what scope there is under the rules to test support again for the Prime Minister. It is reported that sufficient Associations have demanded the matter be examined by the party Board. Many MPs are sending letters to the Chairman of the 1992 Committee demanding action.

Mrs May herself has said she would resign as leader after the Withdrawal

Agreement has gone through. She said nothing about what she would do if it did not. It is looking increasingly unlikely it will go through, as Labour have many difficulties with the Political declaration and the future partnership which is an integral part of the Agreement. As a result there is doubt about her intentions. Nor has she stated a definite leaving date were the Agreement to go through. Her wish to get it through with Labour votes is also unpopular with many Conservatives.

I do not favour the attempt to broker a deal for the PM to step aside in return for getting through a bad Agreement. I am urging the PM to lead us out on May 22nd, by cancelling the European elections. Under the Extension Agreement with the EU we would then automatically leave on May 22nd. We should offer further talks to secure more agreements on a range of things, led by tabling a free trade proposal, to start as soon as we leave.

If the Prime Minister did this the difficult problem of the European elections vanishes, and the Conservatives would go back up in the polls as Leave voters returned, grateful that we will be out on May 22nd. If she does not do this a very unhappy party will look for a legal means under its constitution to force a meaningful vote of confidence in the Prime Minister.

[Striking a successful balance between landlords and tenants](#)

It is right that the law requires landlords to treat their tenants well and to stick to the promises they make in their contracts with tenants. There have been too many cases of bad landlords who have failed to maintain properties to a decent standard, or who have sought to evict tenants for no good reason.

The government is currently reviewing the balance of the law to see if tenants can be offered more security. It is after all their homes we are talking about, and it is disruptive and upsetting if people have to move out of a place they need and like living in.

In the review the government also needs to take into account how landlords are likely to respond. Tenants have more freedom, more choice and more affordable rents if there are enough landlords wishing to make property available. Some overseas markets have been badly damaged by offering strict rent controls and other advantages for tenants, only to discover the supply of rented accommodation falls, creating scarcity and upward pressure on the general rent level.

Today both landlord and tenant can agree to a rental contract for a stated period. The landlord may have good reason why they want the property back at the end of the specified time. If this is no longer possible more potential landlords may be put off, concerned that they cannot get their property back. We have already seen a contraction in the supply of more property to let by

the tax attack on buy to let investments by individuals. The disallowance of mortgage interest relief and the higher stamp duties on such investments has put some people off contemplating put their savings into such a venture. More emphasis has been placed on institutional and company landlords, who will in turn be concerned if contracts are too restricted.

I want tenants to get a good deal, and want there to be sensible legal protections against poor or bad landlords. The government for its part needs to recognise that the best way for tenants to get good deals and have choices is to encourage a larger and healthier private rented market. You do not achieve this by overtaxing provision, nor by intervening too much in the contracts willing landlords want to exchange with willing tenants.

I am not myself a tenant, nor do I have a buy to let investment.

Houses became a bit more affordable last year

In the year to February 2019 house prices edged up by just 0.6% nationwide, whilst average earnings advanced by 3.4%. Housing just got a bit more affordable.

There was a north-south divide, with London prices down by 3.8% and South east house prices down by 1.8% whilst prices rose in all other regions bar one. Prices were particularly strong in Wales, Northern Ireland and the North West of England.

Some will say this is good news. We want more people to be able to afford to buy a home of their own. These recent changes make homes a bit more affordable, without pushing recent buyers into heavy losses shortly after buying.

If you live through a house price collapse, as we did in 2009 during the credit crunch, people struggle to take advantage of the fall owing to the general shortage of credit and the risk of losing their job. Others who have recently bought can end up in a bad position. If they lose their job and main income they may have to try to sell their house into a falling market and end up with a nasty capital loss.

The recent squeeze on house prices has come from the tighter rules over mortgage provision. Banks are under instructions to limit the multiple of earnings they can advance and to demand bigger deposits from the buyers. Higher stamp duties have hit dearer houses where the price falls have been largest.

The issue is how far do we want this to go? Whilst it means more affordable homes, it does not necessarily mean more people manage to buy these homes. If house prices fall because of shortage of mortgage credit, that remains an obstacle to more people fulfilling their dream of a home of their own. Meanwhile the government that says it wants homes to be more affordable continues with penal Stamp duties on many buyers. The London market in particular, where the average price is so much higher, is being badly damaged

by high transaction taxes. It gets in the way of people downsizing and upsizing, moving to minimise their travel to work, and impedes people buying to restore an renovate.

When will the government listen to the need to cut Stamp duties some more?

Wokingham Town Centre comes to life

Yesterday Wokingham was in better spirits with the sun shining. The Marketplace was busy, with the Courtyard restaurant doing a good trade. The new Cook shop opened with many visiting to see the range of prepared meals on offer for home cooking. The sooner Peach Place is fully opened, the better. It was a pleasure to have free parking so I did not need to worry about long I was staying.