

Fixing Universal Credit

Some constituents have sent me copies of a national campaign email wanting the government to stop the roll out of Universal Credit, and expressing worries about it. I am pleased to report that when I visited our local Benefit Centre I was told that introducing it for new claimants had gone smoothly, and the system was liked by both staff and recipients who thought it superior to the multiplicity of benefits with different requirements under the old system. I have had very few constituency cases about it, and no pattern of systemic failures or major issues.

The government is going slowly over transferring existing benefit recipients onto it, and has promised people should not normally lose over it. The government is going to undertake a pilot and is ready to make changes if problems emerge. There has been understandable concern about the speed of receipt of first payments when going on to the system. I have lobbied on this with others, and some improvements have been made. I repeated this wish in the Commons during the Statement his week on UC.

I am also concerned about the treatment of housing costs, understanding that people cannot easily move into a smaller property when the benefit system says they no longer qualify for full rental assistance owing to the size of their home. I also raised this, and will follow up with the Minister who did not give a clear answer.

What now?

The predictable and large defeat of the PM's main policy is unprecedented in my time in the Commons. I have seen governments forced into climb downs on unpopular policies, but never seen a PM put so much effort into defending a policy which united a large element of her own party with all the forces of opposition. It is difficult to fathom why she carried on with it. She knew the DUP would oppose, so that was the end of her majority. She knew 22 people had resigned from government and party posts in protest at the policy, so how were they ever going to support the policy they had so visibly opposed? She knew an active group of more than 60 Eurosceptics who had helped her secure the EU Withdrawal Act and had offered much well researched advice on how to handle the negotiations were in complete disagreement with Chequers and the draft Agreement. Maybe she decided she needed to show both the UK and the EU that the best Agreement on offer from the EU was completely unacceptable to Parliament and a clear majority of the people Parliament represents.

There is no point in going back to the EU to try to fix the Withdrawal Agreement. Even if the EU was prepared after this to take the Irish backstop out of the Agreement there is still no majority to carry the proposal, though

maybe half the Conservatives against it in its current form might think again. Why would the EU offer anything when that too is likely to be rejected?

Instead the PM should come to the House to make her considered statement saying she will return to the EU with two proposals from the UK. The first is to complete rapidly the various agreements underway or needed to ensure a smooth transition on exit on 30 March 2019. The second is to table a full Free Trade Agreement based on the best features of the EU/Canada and EU/Japan agreements which we know the EU can accept. If the EU expresses interest in negotiating such an agreement and agrees broadly with the proposition it should be possible to avoid any introduction of tariffs and other barriers on trade pending the negotiation of a full FTA, under clause 24 of the WTO treaty.

Either way, exiting without a dreadful deal is the right course to follow. The PM was correct to stress No Deal is better than a bad deal. Parliament has just rightly decided that was a very bad deal. Indeed it wasn't a deal at all. It was a very expensive invitation to more prolonged talks about a possible deal.

[Does Parliament want to deny the people their voice, vote and freedom?](#)

Today UK democracy is on trial in Parliament.

The people voted, yet a large number of MPs want to deny them the results of their vote.

Some Remain MPs are too clever by half and too clever for the good of Parliament. They argue that Parliament will take back control, as people wanted, but their idea of Parliament taking back control is to return massive powers to the EU or to prevent us leaving EU control in the first place. What an unpleasant irony! They wish to go to war with the people, and deny them the result of the People's Vote, cynically misrepresenting that as taking back control.

The large Remain side in Parliament never wanted to debate EU matters before the referendum. They told us they were technical, that the EU had little control over us, and that those of us who wanted to talk about the growing power of the EU were wrong and out of touch with the real issues of the day. Now we have voted to leave they want to talk about nothing other than EU membership. They endlessly repeat the arguments that lost them the referendum and carry on hectoring Eurosceptics and trying to terrify us into changing our minds. It is high time we put this debate behind us and left the EU. If we cannot negotiate a good deal in 2 years 9 months before giving the EU what they want, there would be no chance of negotiating a good deal for the future

in 21 months more if we have given away the main bargaining advantages we have through the Withdrawal Agreement.

The people made a decision. They were promised by government and Parliament it would be implemented. Today Parliament should vote down the Withdrawal Agreement, which is the stay under EU control agreement. Parliament should also make clear we must now leave on 29 March. The PM should return to the EU to ensure smooth passage out, as it is in their interest as well as the UK's. She should also offer free trade agreement talks for as soon as we are out. The UK can trade just fine with the rest of the EU under WTO rules. The government should immediately publish our schedule of tariffs for March 30th, which should be lower than the EU schedule and should include zero tariffs on components needed by UK industry and zero tariffs on food we cannot grow or rear for ourselves.

3 line whips and loyalties

I rarely vote against 3 line whips imposed by the Conservative party. Indeed, I have voted with Mrs May and the 3 line whips she has imposed on every occasion so far this Parliament. We have had many votes to win against a group of Conservative MPs seeking to defeat the government over every step it takes to implement the Manifesto pledge to leave the EU. We have won most of them and passed the EU Withdrawal Act as a result.

I am conscious that I was elected as an official Conservative candidate. My electors would normally expect me to vote with the Conservative government a majority of the voters in Wokingham voted for. As an MP I always try to ensure I vote for the interests of my constituents first, for the interests of the nation second and for the party I represent third. I also seek to make sure I vote to keep the promises I made at the last General Election, and where possible to keep the promises my party made. This means that I would only vote against a three line whip in a few circumstances.

1. Where the nationally agreed policy proposed by the Conservatives has a damaging side effect on Wokingham which means I need to put Wokingham's interest before the national and party interest. So if for example a generally approved piece of infrastructure meant the construction of an inappropriate neighbouring investment in my crowded area, I would be the voice of opposition to that particular project.
2. Where the government I usually support asks me to vote for a policy or law which violates or reverses pledges made in the Election Manifesto. Mr Cameron, for example, promised in the 2010 and 2015 Manifesto not to transfer more power to the EU, yet in government regularly did. I needed to oppose that breach of promise.
3. Where I have made an express pledge in the election that was different to the national party Manifesto. In 2017, for example, I expressed disagreement

with the national Manifesto approach of making people pay more for care for the elderly . Mrs May herself then fortunately changed the pledge.

On Tuesday I may be asked to vote for the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by the Prime Minister. I say may, as last time the government wisely withdrew the proposal when they saw they would lose by a large margin. I also say may, because if a rebel or opposition amendment was carried to the government's original proposal then Parliament will only vote on the motion as amended. I will vote with the government and in agreement with the three line whip to vote down all Opposition and rebel amendments to the motion, and would vote with the government to vote down the motion as amended should that circumstance arise.

If, as Mr Corbyn hopes, the unamended proposal is put to the Commons, I will vote against. I will do so primarily because it breaks the Manifesto pledge of the national party, and my own personal pledge to my voters that I will do my best to see through Brexit. It also breaks the national Manifesto promise to negotiate the Withdrawal Agreement in parallel with negotiating the Future Partnership Agreement, for the obvious sensible reason that compromises offered on the one could then have levered gains on the other. The Withdrawal Agreement seeks to undermine the UK bargaining position and lock us into many more months of effective EU membership and uncertainty about the future relationship.

My decision to vote against is reinforced by the weight of opinion in my constituency and in the wider nation according to opinion polls. A majority of those talking or writing to me want me to vote it down. The national polls show much stronger support for leaving than for accepting the 21-45 month delay and further uncertainties of the Mrs May Agreement.

In the end each MP has to exercise his or her judgement. My judgement is that this is wrong. My main reason to vote against is the Agreement violates Manifesto pledges made to secure election, and fails to implement the wishes of voters as determined in the People's Vote. Latest polls endorse the view that this is neither a good deal, nor a popular one.

[Spare us more Project Fear](#)

The more the false fears are dismissed by the people responsible for organising our trade, the shriller and more desperate the Project Fear voices become. The port of Calais assures us of speedy passage for trucks after exit, so the hard core Remainers renew threats of food shortages! European pharmaceutical companies confirm they want to carry on supplying drugs, so some go on about the need to stockpile as if we are entering some undeclared economic war. Airlines carry on selling tickets for post March whilst Project Fear is still pumping out the idea the UK will suddenly be cut off from the continent.

We currently import plenty of items including perishable food from outside the EU under WTO rules without delays and problems. Over the last year I have mainly bought home grown food, but have also enjoyed good fruit and veg that the UK could not grow from African and Latin American countries. I have not needed EU product.

I like to buy domestic produce with lowest food miles where possible. After that I prefer to buy food from developing countries. As an advocate of more trade as one of the ways of helping countries out of low incomes, I like to do my little bit with my own domestic budget.

The Project Fear blizzard on much of the media prevents us having a sensible discussion about how to use all the extra money and new freedoms once we leave. There are also some government Ministers who cannot bring themselves to tell us how they will spend the money and use the new freedoms, as if they are desperate not to. They should exude sensible confidence in our future as an independent country, and should be setting out exactly what we can do in April assuming we just leave. Setting out the advantages should be part of contingency planning for the Withdrawal Agreement being voted down.

The Chancellor needs to prepare a March budget to spend the money saved and boost the economy. The Business Secretary needs to stop encouraging fears and explain how Just in time systems will work just fine once we leave. Why doesn't he sort out the damage done to the car industry by EU and UK regulation and by high vehicle Excise Duty. Why won't he publish with the Trade Secretary a tariff schedule for March 30 that is lower than the EU one, with no tariffs on any imported components? We want a better manufacturing policy after years of EU rules and subsidies helping export factories from the UK.