

Re-opening of Maiden Place Post Office

Following the temporary closure of Maiden Place Post Office, the Post Office will be re-opening the branch on Friday 9 November 2018. This will be in a new location – WHSmith, 10 Maiden Lane Centre, Lower Earley, Reading, RG6 3HD.

I am told that the branch will offer a wide range of Post Office products and services over longer opening hours, so that customers can access their Post Office when convenient.

The Post Office is seeking suggestions about specific aspects of the change such as access arrangements and the internal layout. You can make your views known at:

<https://www.postofficeviews.co.uk/national-consultation-team/maiden-place-rg6-3hd-257939/consultation/intro/>

How not to negotiate with the EU

Too many in the UK government have always wanted to do the EU's bidding. The preferred style of negotiating in the EU has been to ask the Commission what it is seeking to get through, then to tell Ministers that is what they have to accept or ask for. Labour in office had a fear of disagreeing with the EU, so they railroaded through measure after measure whilst claiming it was of little significance or something they had wanted all along. They fortunately realised they could not do this with the Euro, so they used the opt out the Conservatives had negotiated. Labour went on to sign us up to the Treaties of Nice, Amsterdam and Lisbon, with the sacrifice of many vetoes, whilst claiming it was all unimportant and still left us as a powerful independent country. That claim when you pressed revolved only around our right to vote to leave the whole thing, as we could no longer make many changes we wanted to our laws, our budgets and our borders on our own initiative.

The EU itself used the system of rotating Presidencies to push its own vast power grab. When a new member state took over the Presidency of the Council, officials would recommend items from the large EU programme of work that they thought that country or the particular Minister would like to see, and then use them to try to accelerate the passage of those particular items. The UK was always marked down as a member state which under either a Conservative or a Labour government wanted to pursue the single market agenda, so it was brought into play to help put through regulation after directive to control business, stitch up specifications and ways of doing things, and put more and more under the control of the EU and European Court of Justice.

It is therefore not surprising that the civil service defined the Brexit task

in a similar way. They forgot or did not worry that they had tried this foolish way of negotiating when Mr Cameron set them the task of negotiating a better deal for the UK to enable the country to stay in. The civil service talked him into flying from capital to capital to ask them what they would be prepared to grant, to avoid the embarrassment as they saw it of asking for things they would not allow. As a result Mr Cameron ended up asking for very little. He then discovered the hard way that that did not mean he would be granted the very little he asked for. The EU saw it as a negotiation and were presumably pleased that the original ask was so modest. The civil service were then ready to tell him he needed to moderate his very modest demands in order to get an agreement! The final deal was an insult of a renegotiation, which led the UK voters to reject the whole thing.

When it came to Brexit Ministers and the civil service were sent full details of how a good Brexit looked by Eurosceptic thinkers and politicians. Ministers and officials accepted the advice that we needed to send a letter to get out in international law, and to enact the Withdrawal legislation to get out in UK law and to create legal continuity under UK control. They then set about watering down or delaying everything else. The Home Office failed to follow through with the recommended new migration policy. The Home Secretary promised an early Migration paper which never emerged. The Environment Department failed to set out an early new fishing and farming policy ready for March 2019. The Treasury not only refused to set out a post 2019 budget to spend the savings but went out of their way to avoid savings, by encouraging more and bigger payments to the EU after we technically leave. The Business Department worked with a few international companies that did not like Brexit, instead of preparing a policy designed to make the most of the new freedoms once we are out.

Too many civil servants defined their role as to ask anyone in business or elsewhere who disagreed with Brexit to give their best scares over what might happen if we left, and then confront Ministers with these as obstacles to a full or early Brexit. They seemed to suspend their critical faculties, as many of the scares were absurd. A whole series related to the UK not being able to import things after Brexit because we would clog our own borders! Why would we do that, and where was the policy to do it, which was certainly never defined nor announced. The task they were set was to identify those things that we could change and resolve for ourselves, and those things that would work more easily if there were agreements with the EU or individual member states. The task became a vast new Project Fear, with many bogus problems and few of the obvious answers.

Worst of all has been the negotiating strategy. Once again there were endless Ministerial visits to countries that disagree with us, to get Ministers to water down the ask. There were also lots of meetings with those parties and interests in the UK who disagree with Brexit, but precious few with all the forces for Leave to provide a balance or refutation of what was learnt from the subverters of leaving. The officials and Ministers swallowed the idea that the Irish border was an issue, that we do have at least a moral obligation to pay lots more money for much longer to the EU though there is no decent legal base for that, that there is something called smooth trade at

borders which only EU membership can sustain. Why did they not understand we have very smooth access for Chinese imports for example under WTO rules from a country which was not a member of the EU when I last checked. The UK Ministers accepted advice that put the UK in the position of petitioner or offender, rather than rightly posing as the customer of the EU's big exporting industries that wants a better deal.

Improving Universal Credit

I had a meeting with Ministers today about Universal Credit. The transition locally so far has gone fairly smoothly, but there are issues that need sorting out to ensure that claimants do not lose out from change, and to ensure that the benefits sustain those in need whilst providing incentive to those who can work. So far Universal Credit has been a helpful backdrop to a range of policies that have succeeded in stimulating the private sector to create many more jobs and to get many more people into work.

Under the old system people had to claim six different benefits from three different government departments. The marginal rate of tax and benefit withdrawal could be a penal 90%. Under the 1997-2010 government the number of households where no-one was working almost doubled. The single system with a single department should make access easier and distribution costs lower. The government has scrapped the original 7 day waiting period, made advance payments easier for those who need them and are improving benefits for the disabled. This was in response to sensible criticisms of the original scheme which I and others took up at the time.

The roll out of Universal Credit is deliberately slow to try to avoid mistakes and to make improvements as it is brought in. I want it to be generous to those in need, and helpful to those who want to get into work. If there are comments people want taken into account, please let me know.

An MP's surgery

MPs are receiving copies of a lobby email asking us to sign a pledge not to report illegal migrants if they come to our surgeries. Let me explain the nature of an MP's surgery and the legal position to those who send in this email.

The main purposes of an MP's surgery are to take up cases for constituents where government has let them down, treated them badly or failed to apply its

own rules fairly, and to listen to constituents who have advice on how laws and government policies should be changed to make life better. Constituents often stray beyond their relations with national government into their relations with Councils and sometimes even their contractual relations with private sector suppliers and employers. The MP has most chance of helping with national government, where more direct access to Ministers can sometimes trigger a review of an action or policy which resolves the problem, or where legal change can sometimes be generated to fix the problem for the future. I work with local Councillors on local matters, as the Councillors have privileged access to local officers that the MP does not have. Just as collectively MPs can change offending national laws, so Councillors collectively can change offending local policies. Occasionally an MP letter to a private sector company that is misbehaving can help, but as a general rule contractual disputes between constituents and private companies are best worked out in direct dialogue with the company and through the usual complaints processes available.

Attending an MP's surgery does not give the constituent sanctuary from the law. Whilst an MP will handle information carefully, in order to process a complaint or resolve a problem with government the MP will usually have to share the information with the government. I wish to repeat that if someone comes to my surgery they should understand I have no special privilege to give them to protect them from the law, and will normally share their information with the authorities to seek to resolve their issue. If someone is living in Wokingham as an illegal migrant and they wish to seek legal permission to stay then I will assist them if they have a sensible case by contacting the authorities, but I cannot give them some indemnity or help them cover up their illegal status. Similarly if someone comes to me and tells me they have not paid tax I am happy to take up their case with the authorities if they believe they do not have to pay the tax or if they think their assessment is wrong, but I am not in the business of condoning tax evasion and have no blessings to give to tax law breakers.

Quite often an MP has to explain to a constituent that the law is as it is for a good reason, and they like everyone else will just have to accept it even though they do not like it. Sometimes I find advising someone not to pursue a complaint but to accept the world as it is can prove to be good advice which they accept. You can cause yourself a lot of trouble and distress by pursuing complaints that are not going to result in a good outcome. Show me a just cause and a clear unfairness from government and I will fight tenaciously to have the injustice remedied.

Mrs May damages the Union she wants to

defend

Here's an irony. Mrs May says defending the Union of the UK is one of her fundamental principles. Yet in three of her misjudgements over Brexit she puts its future more at risk.

In Northern Ireland the upholders of the Union are the majority community who vote DUP and similar parties. Mrs May instead accepts the analysis of Sinn Fein and the Republic of Ireland, used by the EU to damage Brexit. All of this group wish to end the union of the UK and create an island of Ireland economic area, as a stepping stone to an island of Ireland country. This is proving damaging to Brexit, threatens the end of Mrs May's coalition and is incomprehensible to Unionists in Northern Ireland. Mrs May needs to be on the side of the Unionists who want to support her.

Most of the people of the Union live in England. Mrs May ignores us. The word England rarely crosses her lips. No one speaks for England in the endless devolution/Brexit talks. The strong pro Brexit vote in England is never mentioned. It is as if Mrs May is forgetful of the voting base that gave her the largest Conservative vote since Margaret Thatcher. It is high time she balanced her view of the Union with recognition of England's needs, to create a more realistic and even union.

The third mistake is in her handling of Scotland. If you want to keep the union together you cannot keep giving concessions to an Independence party called the SNP who do not speak for the majority in Scotland upon the only issue that matters to them. Their understandable habit of turning every issue into one about independence wears thin after they lost a referendum on this very question. The PM has to appeal over the heads of the SNP to the pro Union majority in Scotland, Labour, Conservative and others. She has to say No to anti Union demands by the SNP where these are against the spirit of Brexit. Fortunately the SNP lost two referendums in the right order. They first lost the Scottish independence referendum, so they then had to accept the validity of the UK wide EU referendum. It's no good them saying Scotland voted Remain, as the electorate was the whole UK. Their refusal to accept the UK wide result shows how anti democratic they are. They have become the neverendum party wanting to have more referendums on the same topics until they get a result they like.

Mrs May should try disagreeing with the enemies of our Union more, whilst being more in harmony with its defenders. The defenders of the Union accept Brexit, as that is the will of the majority in the Union referendum. It is central to the future of the Union that Brexit is delivered properly and promptly. England expects. Wales expects. All those Leave voters in Northern Ireland and Scotland expect. We only keep our Union if Union decisions matter and are implemented by the politicians.