

Conservative Home article on small boats and costly trains

It is not against the rules for Conservative Governments to do popular things. Sometimes it seems Ministers think it is. Other times Ministers say they want to do popular things but the courts, the officials and the quangos somehow conspire to do otherwise.

The Prime Minister announced early on one popular thing he wants to do. He wants to stop the small boats. Even the political parties who welcome high levels of migration have to say they agree with that aim. The vile trade of illegal travel across the Channel risks people's lives and makes the traffickers an illicit fortune, so all have to condemn. Yet a year on it still goes on, with legal challenges to every attempt to decide cases against illegal arrivals, and to any suggestion that might make the UK a less attractive destination for these people.

A way through surely is to pass a short amendment to the legislation saying that nothing in Human Rights law or Human Rights court can overturn the settled will of Parliament to stop the small boats by the specified means. So far it has not been to stop the boats, but to stop the Ministers stopping the boats. Opposition parties join in gleefully with that, expressing the wish to stop the boats but opposing all ways to do so short of simply letting everyone in.

This week it has been difficult to fathom why the Government has embroiled itself in media stories about the cancellation of a new train line to Manchester, when the Conservative party chose that very city to show its affection for the North. It chose to take its own business bringing its Conference there, creating more demand for the trains. As someone who voted against HS2 when Parliament made the decision to go ahead with the project I thought the business case at the time was very flimsy. That was with costs of around £30bn and with five days a week train commuting in full flourish. They shifted the case from taking a bit of time off the journey to a case based entirely on the alleged need for extra capacity. Today with the work commuting five days a week model broken and with costs around £100bn the business case has fallen over completely.

I travelled up to Manchester on the morning work train from Euston to get to Manchester at 8.45am after just two hours and fifteen minutes of travel. The train was practically empty despite it having myself and some other Conservatives making their one use of the train to Manchester this year for the conference. My return train had on it the passengers from another cancelled one as well as those of us who had booked it. That too had plenty of empty seats. Where is the case based on capacity for this new train line? Will they publish up-to-date usage and fare revenue figures?

I found the Ministerial line to take that they did not comment on speculative stories quite bizarre. Ministers were all refusing to simply say they were

pressing on to build out the railway they had approved, so the media was quite entitled to ask what was going to happen instead. If they had to create this uncertainty the very same week we were all in Manchester they should have at least told us that costs were out of control, the timetable for the work is too delayed and so they are looking at options to see how the project can be carried forward with realistic cost and sensible outcomes. It would be wrong not to do that work.

There are many popular things the Government could do to win back lost Conservative voters and to find some new friends. The Prime Minister's wish to help the motorist is an excellent idea. Small business runs on vans. Families need cars to get to work, to take children to school and to pick up the weekly shop. Left wing Councils masochistically take pleasure in fining, banning and hectoring anyone who dares to get behind the wheel. They are constantly spending large sums wrecking the roads for drivers. Having identified the need to help people, the Government needs now to will the means as well as the end.

Better guidance to Councils will not be enough. They must cut off funding for anti motoring schemes. They must regulate against Councils deliberately narrowing or closing sections of main roads. They must require speed limits to be proportionate and enforceable given the nature of the road. Very low speeds should of course apply near schools at the beginning and end of the school day and in locations where there are plenty of pedestrians seeking to share the road. Main roads with proper pedestrian crossings and light controlled crossings in built up areas do not need to be 20mph.

This Conference showed that many members want a low tax higher growth kind of Conservatism. We want the Government to succeed. We think that being a bit more Conservative is the way to get better answers for the country and to win back lost voters who after all voted for a Conservative Government in large numbers in 2019. To bring tax rates down and live with wonky Treasury models the Chancellor needs to slow the growth in public spending so the deficit does not carry on rising and is not thought to be rising by the Office of Budget Responsibility.

Official figures reveal the shocking news that UK public services have suffered a dreadful fall of 7.5 per cent over three years in their productivity. This means around £30bn extra to run the same services, before all the extra money also needed to pay for all the inflation on top. Ministers need to lead senior officials and chief executives throughout the public services to get back the lost productivity as a matter of urgency before going on to use new technology to boost productivity further. We do need extra medics, teachers and uniformed personnel but we need to run off some of the extra staff recruited to the civil service and similar roles in the quangos. Do this by staff freezes and natural wastage. Getting £30 bn back would go a long way to let us cut taxes. Then the Treasury would find out once again that if you cut the tax rates you often get extra revenue as more people do more and pay more. The deficit comes down faster and your options improve.

The Conservative Party is a low tax party by instinct. It should back the

strivers as well as the drivers. It should not only stop the small boats but help on the small businesses. It should offer a hand up not hand outs to those in need who can flourish in work. It should be generous to those who through illness or disability need financial and other support. Conservative principles of opportunity, self discipline, choice and freedom are still much needed.

The Government will become more popular if it applies more of these Conservative instincts to the challenges of our times. It is not against the rules to do popular things,. Conservatives do not need to be more right wing, or to become some ideological cult. We need to show our commonsense, our humanity and our understanding that we need to work with the grain of human nature. It is the banners, the high taxers, the Government knows besters, the over regulators who should be unpopular. The left are always telling us they know best, they are morally superior and we must do and say as they tell us. Conservatives should live and let live, help people live their dreams and make their own choices.