

Conservative Home – the Conservative groupings

The Prime Minister asked for unity before Christmas. No Conservative MP as a result voted against his Rwanda bill, though there were various reservations and arguments about it across the party. The Opposition and press tried to make more of it than it warranted, only to be disappointed on the night when the bill secured a majority of 44.

Now there is an attempt to write of a civil war within the party. This is to misunderstand how democratic politics in a lively major national party works. Numbers of MPs in Conservative and in Labour are regularly forming ad hoc groups, creating Whatsapp groups and holding meetings to press for more of this or less of that. Great parties have groups that formed in such arguments years ago only to survive and become evergreen groups pursuing a theme or perspective within the family of views that the coalition of their party encompasses. The 1922 Committee in the Conservative party is the most powerful and long lasting, formed over a century ago by a group of MPs after Conservatives had withdrawn from a coalition government. This has become the backbench committee for MPs of all Conservative persuasions

It is healthy that MP pressure groups engage with Ministers and with each other to ensure policy and new laws are properly examined and debated in a party context before being tested in Parliamentary and public debate. I am not sure who the so called five families were in the latest discussions, as I can think of at least eight groupings who had some members concerned lest the small boats legislation did not work. They all always supported the Prime Minister's objective of stopping the small boats. There was the European Research Group as in the papers. There was the vocal New Conservatives Group under Danny Kruger. There was the NTB, formed years ago to support Margret Thatcher during struggles within the party on economic policy and committed to lower taxes and controlled spending. There was the newly formed Conservative Growth Group with a similar outlook to NTB. There was the Commonsense Group of social Conservatives usually preoccupied with education, free speech and law and order. There was Conservative Way Forward, another pro Thatcher grouping formed in 1991. There was the Northern Research Group, a recent grouping committed to levelling up in the Red wall seats. There was the Conservative group in favour of a stronger Union of the UK.

There was also the One Nation group who were regularly briefing the press. It is difficult to believe they have over 100 members who were ever going to rebel as some guided press stories implied. They have various Ministers and maybe a good mailing list of others. I was told they had just 20 people present at their meeting held prior to announcing their backbencher stance on the Bill to the press when they announced they would vote for the bill as long as it was not further amended in specified ways. The other eight groupings I have mentioned here do not publish numbers, and there is considerable overlapping of membership as any MP can join in with more than one group. In total these groupings would have considerably more than 100 MPs attending between them, and an individual group may well have more than 100 on its mailing list.

All this means that for the small boats bill and for other matters there will

continue to be a healthy debate within the Conservative party, because we think public policy matters and can be improved by discussion and friendly disagreements. The civil service often draft bills that do not properly reflect the original aim of the Ministers and party, finding ways to soften their impact or dilute their intent. More often civil servants see a bill as a way to introduce all sorts of things they would like that are not necessary for the original intention. Recent governments from the Blair government onwards have got into bad habits of producing bills that need massive amendment by the government late in their progress. The drafts emerge without proper consultation. They collide with realities late in the day when the outside world wakes up to the long list of clauses and complex language of the bill . Often bills fail to tell us the interesting details, which is left for later decision requiring secondary legislation. This can be cause for further delay and later wrangling. Of course it is wise to allow government by Statutory Instruments to make future adjustments for things like fee and fine levels or standards but that is no reason to avoid telling Parliament what the starting levels are when the bill goes through.

The government would be well advised to review its Rwanda Treaty and bill to make sure it is fit for purpose. They would be well advised to switch the camera from the small boats to the big economic issues where we can make more progress for more people with the right budget and with a proper growth strategy. On migration itself it is the sheer numbers now coming into the country legally that causes problems. We need to build three new cities the size of Southampton each year to house and serve them which worries voters who see we are not keeping up with demand. .Such a rate makes it so much more difficult to resolve the shortage of housing and the length of NHS waiting lists. Showing good progress with the government's new policy of cutting legal migration would be a good thing to put under the cameras next year rather than the issue of how many flights take off to Rwanda and when. We need to take some pressure off public services and housing, and will find many Conservative voters relieved if we reduce the overall numbers as we promised in 2019. Diluting the proposals for tackling legal migration control is not a good idea.