

Debate on housing numbers

I joined in the limited time debate today on housing numbers and the Levelling-up Bill. In advance of this final Commons Report stage I worked successfully with MPs Theresa Villiers and Bob Seely and others to persuade the government to remove mandatory top down targets for housing numbers, and to allow more flexibility for Councils in drawing up their local plans over how many new homes are sustainable and realistic. We also secured a promise to end the ability of developers to game the system by getting additional planning permissions for extra houses outside the approved areas in plans. I reinforced these issues briefly during the debate and am glad collectively we have been able to gain new opportunities for Wokingham – and West Berkshire – to draw up a new local plan with a better balance between new building and protecting farmland and green spaces.

Managing the Public Sector – My Article for Conservative Home

Labour lost office in 1979, when it lost control of the public sector. It's own trade Union friends and supporters created a winter of discontent, with rubbish piled in the streets and the dead going unburied. The party had unleashed a rapid inflation it could not control. Workers were fed up with pay controls and with the squeeze on living standards they were experiencing. In those days Ministers were to blame for the price rises and the pay policy.

The government thinks today is different. They say an independent Central Bank and the outbreak of a European war have brought on the inflation. The public services are these days largely run by independent boards with professional management. It is their job to get on with the employees, settle the pay and raise the productivity to help pay for it.

There are two main problems for the government. The first is these independent bodies are handling things badly. The Board of NHS England has received huge increases in funding from Ministers only to deliver the biggest ever backlog and problems for many patients in getting access to a GP or hospital appointment. The six senior managers there earning well over £200,000 each do not appear on the media to make the case for their pay and staffing proposals. What is their plan to recruit and retain the staff they need? Where is the long awaited manpower plan?

The Bank of England created excess money and held interest rates too low for too long, ending with an inflation rate five times its target and five times the level in China, a country also facing high energy prices from the war. The railways effectively nationalised by the need to subsidise empty trains

over covid has gone on losing vast sums and now expects a pay rise on the taxpayers. Where are the productivity raising plans and the more popular timetables?

The second problem is the public expects Ministers to sort these things out. After all they appoint the key players that run these bodies. They can take them back under Ministerial control if they are not working. Weak poll ratings are saying to Ministers "Get a grip". Deliver better service for an affordable tax bill. The NHS has received record levels of funding in the last three years and has presided over wasteful PPE contracts, underused contracts to access private hospitals and the cost of setting up and shutting down the Nightingales.

The problem is magnified by the poor performance of lots of branches of central government directly under Ministerial control. There has been a collapse of productivity in processing asylum applications. There are delays in getting probate approvals and in passport renewals. The civil service is good at delaying implementation of Ministerial decisions they do not like. They often offer advice to keep the UK fully aligned with the EU and to give in to the forces of the global soft left.

So what should the government do? There is no simple legislative solution. Wrestling changes of law through to force public sector employees to give up rights to strike may harden disputes. The delay in doing so makes it impossible for this to work for this December's struggles. There was plenty of spare Parliamentary time if Ministers had wanted a new strike law this month. What the government needs to do is to mentor and encourage their chief executives to find ways of raising productivity and negotiating something for something settlements. If they cannot they need to replace chief executives who cannot manage their services.

The revelation of just how few asylum cases Home Office officials process compared to past levels shows how in some cases we are talking about a productivity collapse. What are the figures for probate cases, for issuing passports and the rest where there are backlogs? Do we need incentive pay? More staff? The senior managers should be organising the answers. Ministers clearly want a better service with backlogs cleared and should authorise and switch resources to do so.

Improvement should be easiest on the railways. There is no case for giving train drivers paid well over average pay a large rise without action to improve working practices. Given the collapse of five day a week commuting and rise of on line home working the railway no longer has the same capacity to harm the economy as it once did. The railway management need to get across to their staff that the way to sustain and improve higher wages comes from running more popular services. Serve people better and you have more money to share with staff.

Productivity has stagnated all this century in the UK public sector, despite huge sums spent on digital processing and despite the decline of in person service. More and more highly paid managers paid well in excess of the Prime Minister have added to costs without adding to performance. Whenever a

service fails or lets us down Ministers are blamed and left answering the unanswerable questions about what went wrong. There is no substitute for Minister calling in these expensive CEO s and insisting on better plans to recruit and motivate the right staff and start clearing backlogs.

Keeping the lights on when the wind does not blow

I have been warning of the dangers of relying on renewables for our electricity before there is sufficient battery storage, pump storage and green hydrogen production to make energy available when there is no wind or sun to power the grid.

Over the last year the government did listen. It has kept three coal power stations and given them contracts for when we need that back up power. They have opened Rough to give us a bit more gas storage for cold windless days. They have accepted that gas is an important transition fuel this decade, often providing more than half our electricity as well as heating most homes and energy intensive industrial processes.

Yesterday renewables contributed a small single figure percentage of our electricity as demand rose to combat dark and low temperatures. We needed the fossil fuel back up. The government needs to encourage further back up investment in pump storage and make sure we have sufficient gas burning generators all the time we need them to keep sufficient power in the grid.

The system operator and regulator also need to review the capacity of the grid and street cable system. We cannot keep adding new electrical demands to home and work without installing extra cables. Switching cars and heating represents big increases in electricity needed which is way beyond present cable capacity.

The difficulties of balancing a system with more and more interruptible power allied to the lack of capacity to handle more Scottish wind energy should lead to some new thinking. Energy policy used to worry about security of supply first, then price and green issues. There needs to be a stronger plan for security. Imports are not a reliable answer as we have seen with the EU gas problems and the shut down of many French nuclear plants.

Strikes and public sector management

There is discussion of a new law to limit the right to strike in key public services, just as armed service personnel agree not to strike when they join up. If the government thinks such a law would be helpful they should have used some of the underused Parliamentary time this November and December to put one in. They did not, meaning such a law cannot now have an impact for current rounds of Christmas and New Year strikes.

My view is Ministers need to engage more with the Chief Executives and senior officials who are meant to manage these matters. Ministers direct, managers manage. Ministers set policies. CEOs and senior officials implement them. Ministers have made clear they want to stop the flow of illegal migrants across the Channel. They have stated they want the health backlogs down. They want faster turnaround of asylum claims, of passport renewals, of probate filings and many more other admin processes connected to licences, taxes and benefits.

They have in many cases authorised large increases in spending and given approval to a major expansion of state employment since 2019. Now they must ask where is all the money going? Why isn't there more service from the extra people and cash? When will their aims be met?

It looks as if the independent body and quango model lets us down badly. It also is clear Ministers are having to involve themselves much more in running departments if they want to get things done. I will write more about the role of public sector well paid CEOs and why we do not get better results. All too often Ministers agree an aim only to discover a quango is doing the opposite and makes it difficult for a Minister to get through a desired change of policy.

My Speech at the Parliamentary Debate on the Future of BBC Local Radio

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): I entirely agree with that passionate defence of localism by Rachael Maskell. Local must mean local and we do not want people in the BBC in London imposing on us their views on how our local radio should be conducted and how big our locality should be. I see behind the centralised planning at the BBC a distorted version of what our constitution should look like within the United Kingdom, and a wish to impose that—against the clear majority wishes of people, whenever they have been asked about these subjects in referendums and elections.

It is not just that the BBC wishes to create phony regional groupings instead

of truly local radio, but that it has a very distorted view of devolution. The BBC seems to be an enthusiast for devolution to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but it does not even know England exists. It always wants lopsided devolution. One of the four important constituent parts of the United Kingdom is scarcely ever mentioned; it is never suggested it should have any powers or right to self-government and there is no engagement with English issues on BBC radio in the way that there is a clear engagement with Scottish, Welsh or Northern Ireland issues. That causes enormous resentment.

In my own case, local radio is organised at the county level, at Radio Berkshire. That makes sense, because it is an area that we can recognise and there is some loyalty to our royal and ancient county. Many people now do not know that it had its borders artificially compressed in a local government reorganisation some 50 years ago, under a Conservative Government that I think made some mistakes. The county retains an enormous amount of goodwill and residual loyalty, and people are very happy for our local radio to be organised at that scale. If people had real choice, however, I think Wokingham would rather have a different radio from Reading, and I think we would probably rather have a different radio from Windsor, because we have a different set of issues. But we accept that there have to be some compromises because talented people need to be appointed and paid wages, and that cannot be done to a sensible budget at very local levels.

I urge the BBC to look in the mirror and understand why, in many respects, it is getting so out of touch with its audiences. It has a very narrow range of views and issues that it will allow people to discuss, and it has a particularly warped perspective on how we feel about our areas and what our loyalties belong to. I am allowed to express views from time to time on BBC Radio Berkshire. It does not put me through the ordeal of a pre-interview to find out whether my views are acceptable and fit its caricature of a Conservative in the way that nearly always happens if national radio is thinking of interviewing me. Then, I always have the double interview, and I quite often fail the first interview test because my views are clearly too interesting or unacceptable, or do not fit the caricature that the radio wishes to put into its particular drama. So people are spared my voice on radio and I have more free time, which is perhaps a wonderful outcome from those events.

I do not find that my local radio quite plots the drama as strongly as national BBC radio and television. I am very grateful for that because I think that good, independent broadcasting of the kind that the BBC says it believes in should allow people of decent views—not extremists who want to break the law, or racists—to conduct civilised conversations and debates through the medium of the BBC. But all too often, that is truncated or impossible because of the way in which the editors operate and their pre-conceived set of views, about which they wish to create some kind of drama.

Colleagues have made extremely good points, which I will emphasise, about the treatment of staff and the way these kinds of proposals are planned. If the BBC wishes to run truly local services, it must listen to us—the local people and the local people's representatives—and treat its staff well, and be aware

that they have given good service in the past and should be taken on a journey of change that makes sense for them as well as for the BBC. This all looks rather top-down, abrupt and unpleasant. Successful organisations understand that their own journeys, evolving as institutions, are best conducted if, at the same time, they allow good journeys for the staff who give them loyal service. That does not seem to be happening in this case.

I will spare you a bit of time, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have made the main points that I wished to make. The BBC needs to be more open to a wider range of views. If it wants to be local, it has to ask us what local means.