

North Sea oil and gas

Yesterday the government announced that it will be licencing more oil and gas fields for production in the North Sea soon. This follows an intervention by the Chancellor with the Business Secretary, whose department and regulators were delaying or refusing permissions for development of some discoveries. This announcement comes on the back of the recent licencing of the small Abigail field.

I have been making the case that it means less carbon dioxide is produced if we burn our own North Sea gas delivered by pipeline rather than import LNG from Qatar by ship. I have argued that we will collect much more tax revenue if we burn our own gas rather than importing as the UK imposes substantial taxes on the production of oil and gas. It also means we create and keep more well paid jobs by sustaining our domestic industry instead of relying on imports.

I look forward to further successes for commonsense and for import substitution.

My Question to the Minister during an Opposition Day debate on the cost of living and food insecurity

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that there is no reason why we should not produce 100% of the temperate food that we need? We lost a huge amount of market share when the common agricultural policy was introduced, and some of us want to get that back now that we are out of the CAP. Is it not better to cut the food miles and rely on local jobs and local production?

Victoria Prentis (The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs): It is also a pleasure to talk to my right hon. Friend about these matters. I have also spoken to him many times, in this instance about his plan to boost horticulture, particularly fruit and vegetable production, in his constituency and, indeed, across the nation. Fruit production has fallen to 16% of what we consume nationally, and fruit is one of the very few foodstuffs whose price has risen in comparative terms over the last 10 years when the price of most other foodstuffs has fallen.

Working with the civil service- my Conservative Home article

I do not think the present government is getting the best out of the Civil Service. The Prime Minister has a new opportunity to construct a Downing Street structure and appoint staff he trusts to help him deliver his vision.

The Levelling Up Secretary has just unveiled a wide ranging set of proposals to spread prosperity, better jobs and ownership more widely around the UK. He will need the help of the Prime Minister to mobilise the various Whitehall departments that have crucial roles to play. He needs many actions from Education and Transport, from Treasury and Health, from Trade and from Business and from several others.

Inspired by the good response to [my article](#) on how Downing Street worked under Margaret Thatcher, I think it might be helpful to set out how the Thatcher team worked with Whitehall to put through bold new policies that were designed to improve the prosperity and freedoms of citizens. We were able to make substantial and timely changes without major constitutional upheavals or Civil Service reform.

I was struck by [a recent article by Daniel Hannan](#) which was critical of the Civil Service. He pointed out that officials make many errors and design bad policies which Ministers get blamed for. He felt Ministers now cower before Civil Service political correctness, and are told much of what they want to do is impossible owing to the views of independent quangos, the body of law and the results of arranged polls and one-sided consultations. He argued that the Civil Service has specialised in improving its diversity of recruits, whilst ensuring there is no diversity of outlook or view.

He contrasted the successful pursuit of working vaccines by an individual brought in from outside to lead a specialist small unit to solve the problem, and the difficulties with the rest of the pandemic response that mainly relied on more traditional Civil Service people and procedures. He sees the Civil Service as internationalist, pining for Remain and in favour of a larger but not necessarily a more effective state. Ministers he concluded are there to take the blame and to be in the wrong, but often have insufficient engagement or leverage over the large staffs that work in their departments and quangos.

I know what he means, but I think many of the answers lie in the hands of good Ministers. Ministers with a large majority have the crucial power to change the law if the old laws get in their way. They can command huge resources of people, money and message. They can abolish quangos, appoint new Heads, issue clear new public instructions to them which Parliament may debate. They can ask their departments to do more of this and less of that. They have the power of the purse and of the pulpit.

When I helped Thatcher there was of course a Civil Service culture and a controlling set of ideas within the Civil Service machine that was not the same as the collective views of the government. The official Civil Service government was not proposing Union reform or privatisation or lower taxes. It would have preferred to live with a larger public sector and older comfortable ways. It seemed to find the wind of change we wanted as abrasive. Some probably wanted it to fail to be able to say quietly it had warned us of its imperfections. Aware of this I decided on a careful course of action to implement the big idea of wider ownership, of everyone an owner. It was a popular idea that embraced many of the actions and policies that the Civil Service and Unions found challenging.

I did not suggest to the PM that she held a Cabinet, flagged up the big policy aim and challenged the Civil Service to create and use the conventional architecture to deliver it. The last thing I wanted was an overarching Cabinet Committee for wider ownership. That would doubtless have slowed and diluted what we wanted to do. It would have given critics of the whole idea a forum to debate the philosophy and sow doubts. Cabinet Ministers would have been less willing to accept individual responsibility. Instead the PM and Cabinet colleagues introduced the main ideas split by department, with the PM discussing with each of the relevant colleagues how they could pursue the key parts as stand alone ideas within their areas.

The Treasury was to lead on privatisation with John Moore, a Minister, to work bilaterally with the other sponsor departments on the relevant industries. The Treasury would mastermind the timetable and offer central resource on the preparation and sale process. The Social Security department was to lead on pensions reform, introducing personal portable pensions for the first time so people could control their own retirement savings more directly. They did so via a general welfare review to gauge demand, to seek outside views, and to reform other features of what they were doing. Norman Fowler did a great job, with no leaks as he prepared the ground for radical changes.

The Business department led on making it easier for people to set up and grow their own businesses and worked with the Treasury on tax incentives. The energy department worked on radical proposals to get more cheaper energy to fuel our businesses, introducing pro competitive policies, as well as preparing gas and electricity for privatisation. The Housing department was to hone and improve the Right to buy policies to give more people a chance to own, and to develop homesteading, shared ownership and sales of redundant public sector land to boost wider home ownership at affordable prices. The Transport department offered National Freight for sale to its employees in an exciting experiment with employee ownership as well as selling BA and bringing in more private capital to buses.

It was only when I was confident that each Cabinet member had found policies they liked and were willing to see through, and was sure the Departments would assist them, that I proposed to the PM she set out the overarching vision and tied it all together. As there was already buy in by the main departments the vision then helped. The Civil Service ensured each major privatisation we did needed individual legislation, resisting enabling

powers. I decided not to fight this as we needed a measured pace of privatisations and Parliamentary process allowed a public debate and consideration of all the detail in each major case.

Today there needs to be similar commitment to levelling up department by department. Education will doubtless take responsibility for challenging targets for literacy, numeracy and qualifications. Health will need to think through how it achieves the bold aims on eradicating health inequalities by region. Transport has a major task to clear the jams and improve the trains in many places. Business and the Treasury need to give more thought to improving the UK's competitiveness so more businesses start up and more investment is attracted.

The Government's enthusiasm for more devolved power to Mayors and Councils will cut across some of the national targets and programmes and will provide a complication more than an impetus, save in the minority of places that find and back a Mayor or Council that does know how to do it and how to work with central government.

The new structures at 10 Downing Street risk being top heavy. They will need the Chief of Staff to work well with the Cabinet Secretary, the Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office and the Permanent Secretary of Downing Street. This weeks failure of the government machine to deliver an NHS plan in time for the PM and Secretary of State to announce it on Monday is a sign of how things need to be improved sharply.

[My interventions in the Northern Ireland \(Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern\) Bill](#)

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): In the light of these Lords amendments for a crisis, does the hon. Gentleman not think the crisis has been brought on by the EU interfering in the internal market of GB and Northern Ireland and diverting trade, and would he urge the EU to step back so that we can get back on track?

Peter Kyle (Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland): What is holding us back is people continually re-fighting the battles of the past. We need to build a better future, and we can do that only if we are facing the future, unlike the right hon. Gentleman. Instead of a break from the past, the Government have dragged us back into the Brexit quagmire, as he and others seem hell-bent on doing, which has directly led to the Bill being needed with immediate effect.

Northern Ireland has often been a secondary issue for this Government. When

the consequences of decisions taken by Ministers have played out in Northern Ireland, the Government have behaved as though they found themselves at the scene of an accident over which they had no control. This bystander effect peaked last week. The Northern Ireland Secretary and the Foreign Secretary both pretended that the Northern Ireland protocol was purely a matter for the Executive, but in reality it was part of a deal drafted, negotiated and signed by the Prime Minister, and the legal duty to uphold that deal rests with the EU and UK Governments. Ministers cannot wash their hands of it as easily as they pretend.

Now the First Minister has resigned, with the protocol and broken ministerial promises playing a central role. The manner and impact of the resignation raise serious questions that must be addressed. I have sympathy for the position in which the Democratic Unionist party has been placed. Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson, in frustration, revealed that the Prime Minister told him that the current protocol negotiations have only a 30% chance of success. If that is the case, do the Government have a plan B? Have Departments worked up impact assessments and action plans for the eventuality or possibility of article 16 being triggered?

The people of Northern Ireland and the political parties have been given promise after promise by the Prime Minister and his Ministers, some of them fundamental and existential, such as the promise of no border in the Irish sea. It is no wonder that frustrations have boiled over, that trust in this Government is at rock bottom and that we find ourselves in this moment where hope seems so distant.

We have just discovered that the Northern Ireland Secretary is flying to Washington tomorrow. That is right: the Secretary of State will get in a plane and fly right over Northern Ireland on his way to Washington. That says everything we need to know. There is no one with the stature required in this Government, so he has to go to America to find a grown-up to be the honest broker they need.

While the Labour party welcomes this legislation and has supported its progress at every stage, we cannot pretend that it has an answer for how the Executive will be reformed if more progress is not made in protocol negotiations. It is hard to know whether the ongoing negotiations with the EU are a priority, because after three rounds of negotiations there have been no statements on progress made to the House. Considering the vital importance of those negotiations to the immediate circumstances in Northern Ireland, I hope the Foreign Secretary can come here and make a statement without any more delay. The political parties in Northern Ireland deserve such an update on the record—we have had enough nods, enough winks and enough back-handed promises that are never met and do nothing more than destabilise the fragile political settlement.

The Bill was supposed to deliver greater resilience in the institutions established under the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday agreement, but once again their fragility has been highlighted. Too often, Northern Ireland has been overlooked and the work to deliver on the promise of peace allowed to stall. While the Labour party supports the Bill and hopes it receives Royal

Assent in time to be effective, it is worrying how much of it may already be obsolete. The provisions of the Bill alone cannot enable stability. To do that, Ministers must take responsibility for their words and actions, which have shaken faith within Northern Ireland. It is time that this Government, from the Prime Minister down, are seen to care about their words, promises and actions in a vitally important part of our United Kingdom, and to directly work on a way back for the Executive.

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Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): But is it not the case that the EU is breaking the protocol? The protocol clearly protects the UK internal market and says that communities' consent is needed and that trade must not be diverted.

Jeffrey M Donaldson (DUP Chief Whip, Shadow DUP Spokesperson): Article 16 of the protocol—this is relevant to the debate this evening—makes provision for the UK Government to act unilaterally, and the Minister has said that the Government are prepared to do that. However, they said that in their Command Paper over six months ago, and in those six months the cost to Northern Ireland businesses has exceeded well over half a billion pounds. In those six months, businesses in Northern Ireland have faced costs and disruption to their trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. This is simply unacceptable.

The European Union said that the main purpose of the protocol, apart from setting out practical arrangements for the movement of goods, was to protect the political institutions in Northern Ireland and the Good Friday agreement. Does anyone now seriously believe that the protocol has achieved that purpose? It has not. Why? Because there is no Unionist consent for the protocol. It has changed our constitutional status with the rest of the United Kingdom. It has superseded article 6 of the Act of Union itself, which makes provision for free trade within our own country.

I am therefore disappointed that, although we are debating this Bill and the issues it addresses, they are relatively minor in comparison with the key commitments made by the Government in the New Decade, New Decade agreement, which have not been honoured two years later. Why should my constituents be treated as second-class citizens in their own country? Why should my constituents be subjected to laws that are imposed by a European Union over which we have no say whatever? We have regulations that my Ministers are required to implement and over which we have no say whatever.

We have been patient. We have waited and we have waited for the Government to act or for the EU to recognise the reality that this protocol is harming political and economic stability in Northern Ireland. But I am afraid that I have to say to the Minister: enough is enough. We need action—not words, not more promises, as the hon. Member for Hove said, and not more empty commitments. We need action by the Government, because this is about the Union, about the future of the Union and about protecting Northern Ireland's place within the internal market of our own country. Why are we leaving it to the European Union to come up with a solution? This Government are the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Their primary responsibility is the integrity of this country. It is time the integrity of this country, and Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom, was properly protected in line with the promises made in this agreement.

[Oxford lecture "The long road to net zero"](#)

On Friday 25th February at 11.30 Rt Hon Sir John Redwood D.Phil FCSI will give a lecture in the Old Library, All Souls College Oxford on the topic of the long road to net zero.

The lecture will chart the continued dependence of the world on fossil fuels this decade. It will assess the growing divide in approach between the UK and EU on the one hand and China, Russia and India on the other. It will ask how green are various technologies recommended for the transition and warn against compliant countries importing products with a high carbon content to lower their own CO2 scores. It will argue that the green revolution needs to be a popular revolution, driven by the wishes and needs of billions of consumers, just as the digital revolution has been. It will examine the way in which China and Russia might exploit their positions in industrial manufacture and oil and gas to shift the balance of world power.